Active vs. Passive Voice

Use the **active voice** whenever possible.

- In **active voice**, the subject **performs the action**.
- In **passive voice**, the subject **receives the action**.

**Active:** The candidate believes that Congress must place a ceiling on the budget.

**Passive:** It is believed by the candidate that a ceiling must be placed on the budget by Congress.

**Active:** Researchers earlier showed that high stress can cause heart attacks.

**Passive:** It was earlier demonstrated that heart attacks can be caused by high stress.

**Active:** The dog bit the man.

**Passive:** The man was bitten by the dog.

### Converting sentences to active voice

Look for a "by" phrase (e.g., "by the dog" in the last example above). If you find one, the sentence may be in the passive voice. Rewrite the sentence so that the subject buried in the "by" clause is closer to the beginning of the sentence.

If the subject of the sentence is somewhat anonymous, see if you can use a general term, such as "researchers," or "the study," or "experts in this field."

### When to use passive voice

- To emphasize the action rather than the actor
  After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the long-range planning committee.

- To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage
  The data processing department recently presented what proved to be a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by . . . .

- To be tactful by not naming the actor
  The procedures were somehow misinterpreted.

- To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant
  Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.

- To create an authoritative tone
  Visitors are not allowed after 9:00 p.m.