

STRONG BUSINESS WRITING

Passive and Active

The discussion of passive vs. active in business writing concerns two different aspects of writing, one grammatical and the other tonal.

Passive and Active Sentence Structure

When talking about sentence structure, the difference between a passive and active sentence is in how each identify the *agent*—*i.e.*, the person or entity performing, not receiving, the main action. In the sentences below, try to identify the main agent.

- a. The head supervisor required employees to come into work an hour earlier on Monday.
- b. The report on the upcoming merger was drafted by the executive committee.
- c. The budget issue was not solved before the beginning of the next fiscal cycle.

In the first sentence, the agent (*the head supervisor*) appears at the beginning of the sentence, before the verb (*required*). This marks the sentence as active. In the second sentence, the agent (*the executive committee*) appears later in the sentence, in the phrase *by the executive committee*. This sentence is passive because the agent is relegated to a more minor position within the sentence. In the third sentence, the agent of the sentence is not identified at all. This is also a passive sentence.

A grammatically passive sentence follows this pattern:

subject	BE	+	verb + <i>ed</i>	<i>by</i> [agent]
New employees	are		cautioned	
The problem	was		resolved	
A new manager	must be		hired	
The executive summary	has not been		read	by the president.

Business writing generally prefers the active structure over the passive structure since an active structure has more vitality. That said, the passive structure is more appropriate in the two following situations:

1. The writer wants to emphasize the action rather than who did the action.
2. The writer cannot or does not want to identify who did the action.

The choice of a passive sentence structure can be for reasons of politics or tact—when identifying the agent would cause problems—or for the reason of desiring to highlight the idea rather than the person behind.