ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

Active Voice: If the grammatical subject of the sentence performs the action indicated by the verb, the sentence is active.

Dresden mixes a potion.
> What is the grammatical subject?   Dresden
> What is the action in the sentence? Mixing a potion
> Does Dreden do the potion-mixing? Yes, therefore the sentence is active.

Passive Voice: If the grammatical subject of the sentence does not perform the action but is the recipient of the action, the sentence is passive. Sometimes, the person performing the action is added in a prepositional phrase ("by John"), but this phrase can be dropped without making the sentence ungrammatical.

The potion is mixed (by Dresden).
> What is the grammatical subject?   The potion
> What is the action in the sentence? Mixing
> Does the potion do the mixing? No, therefore, the sentence is passive.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with using the passive voice. However, since passive voice expresses a state of being rather than direct action, a writer who overuses passive voice sounds static rather than dynamic, tedious rather than interesting.

- **Use passive voice when the person performing the action (the "doer") is unknown or unimportant.**
  A woman was murdered in a hotel last night.
  In 1719, a council meeting was held, in the course of which a wizard was killed.

- **Use passive voice to focus attention on the action rather than on the doer of the action.**
  The demon was banished before it could be questioned by the wizard.
  Bob the Skull was given to Dresden by his uncle.

- **In all other situations, use active voice, especially if the doer of the action is important enough to be mentioned in a prepositional phrase starting with "by".**
  ☹ *Crimes are investigated by Dresden.*
  ☺ *Dresden investigates crimes.*
  ☹ *The war was started by Dresden and Bianca.*
  ☺ *Dresden and Bianca started the war.*
  ☹ *The woman was killed by Black Magic.*
  ☺ *Black Magic killed the woman.*

►Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Jim Butcher's *Storm Front* (Book I of the Dresden Files).