Passive and Active Voice

What are passive and active voice?
In active voice, the subject of a sentence performs the actions indicated by the verb. In passive voice, the subject is no longer active, but is acted upon by the verb. For example:

- **Active voice:** The dastardly Dr. Fey Leine (subject) let (verb) the cat out of the bag.
- **Passive voice:** The cat (subject) was let (verb) out of the bag.

How to identify passive voice:
Passive voice can be identified by a few key features:

- The use of “to be” verbs (am, is, was, were, be, being, been, has, have, having, had)
  
  *Be careful with this. “To be” verbs can be used without causing passive voice, as in present progressive (I am having a good time), past participles (I have studied abroad), and simple sentences (I was a secret agent).

- The ability to insert “by the ______” at the end of the phrase.
  
  *The cat was let out of the bag by the dastardly Dr. Fey Leine.*

Reasons to use active voice:
- Active voice makes writing more dynamic and interesting
- Active voice is specific and direct
- Active voice is stronger stylistically for most writing genres

Reasons to use passive voice:
- You are writing a scientific paper. Passive voice is accepted here for the following reasons:
  - Avoids directly attributing names to facts
  - Creates a more neutral, informative tone and highlights what is being studied rather than who is studying it
- The subject being acted upon is more important than the subject doing the action or anytime you want to avoid placing emphasis on the performer of the action
  - If the involvement of Dr. Fey Leine is unimportant, then we should instead write:
    
    *The cat was let out of the bag.*

How to switch between active and passive voice:
Passive to active:
- Reverse the order of your sentence so the person acting on the subject becomes the subject. **Note:** If you don’t have information about who/what performed the action of your passive sentence, you will not be able to convert it to active.

  *The cat was let out of the bag* becomes Dr. Fey Leine let the cat out of the bag.

Active to passive:
- Insert a “to be” verb in front of the past participle of your verb, and move the object acted upon to the front of the sentence. Moving the subject of your active sentence into a “by ______” phrase at the end of your passive sentence is optional. **Note:** In order to change an active sentence to passive your active sentence must have a direct object.

  *I ate macaroni and cheese* becomes The macaroni and cheese was eaten (no direct object).

Works Consulted:
Purdue University Online Writing Lab (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/); Towson University Writing Center (https://webapps.towson.edu/ows); The Everyday Writer, 5th ed. (Lunsford)