

Campus Academic Resource Program

Active and Passive Voice

This handout will:

- Define the difference between active and passive voice.
- Explain the advantages of the active voice.
- Provide an overview of when the passive voice is acceptable.
- Include practice activities modifying the passive voice into the active voice.

Active v. Passive Voice

Often, professors fault their students for over-use of the passive voice. This is not an issue of grammar or mechanics but an issue of style: writing which relies too heavily on the passive voice becomes dull and plodding, even if all other components of the paper are exceptional. Fortunately, writing in the active voice is easy, as long as you understand what the term means and why readers and writers generally prefer it.

- **Active voice** positions the actor as the subject of the sentence.
 - “We showed the movie last Saturday.”
- **Passive voice**, in contrast, positions the acted upon as the sentence’s subject.
 - “The movie was shown last Saturday.”

Passive voice can often be identified by:

- The presence of a “to be” verb (is/are/were/was/be/being/been) followed by another verb. If a “to be” isn’t followed by another verb, then the sentence is active.
 - Passive: “We *were surprised*.”
 - Active: “The situation *is* volatile.”
- A “by” phrase following the verbs.
 - “We were told *by* the professor to study more.”

Using the search function (ctrl+f) to find “to be” verbs and “by” can often help speed up the process of finding the passive voice and modifying these instances in which the active voice is more effective stylistically.

The Advantages of the Active Voice

Consider the difference between the following statements:

- 1.) Passive: “The intersection was walked across.”
- 2.) Active: “I walked across the intersection.”

The second sentence (in the active voice) clearly communicates the event more effectively than the first did. This reflects the three superior qualities we associate with the active voice:

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- *Brevity/concise style*: Sentence 1 and 2 use just as many words, and yet sentence 2 provides significantly more detail. While we could maintain the passive voice while also explaining who crossed the road, we would have to lengthen the sentence to “The intersection was walked across by me.” That’s two more words than sentence 2, yet they communicate the exact same amount of information.
- *Simplicity and elegance of tone*: Of the three main advantages of the active voice, this is the least tangible, but of equal importance. Put simply, sentence 1 sounds stilted and awkward, and sentence 2 does not.
- *Clarity*: In sentence 1, it’s unclear who or what crossed the intersection. That is because the acted upon (the intersection) is the subject of the sentence, rather than the object. In the second sentence, the actor is the subject (I). The result is a clearer sentence.
 - The passive voice is also more likely to create “hedging” sentences. These occur when the author either isn’t certain about details or wants to conceal information to strengthen their argument, and so they deliberately or unintentionally omit information through the passive voice.
 - For example, “Mistakes were made in my congressional office” is a hedging statement which uses the passive voice.
 - The statement “I tacitly allowed my most senior aides to accept bribes and campaign contributions from the oil industry in exchange for my vote in favor of loosening fracking regulations” doesn’t hedge.

In an academic paper, we often have to communicate complex ideas using complex sentences. As sentences grow longer, it is easier to slip into the passive voice, but do your best to avoid using the passive voice too frequently. Remember that the passive voice can often be identified by keeping your eye out for “to be” verbs and the word “by” as was discussed above, especially by using the search key.

When to Use the Passive Voice

Despite these many advantages to the active voice, there are instances in which the passive voice is permissible or even preferable.

When it helps vary the sentence structures of a given passage:

- Using active voice too frequently can sometimes make for monotonous reading, because each successive sentence sounds too similar to the previous. This is particularly the case when you discuss the same subject (such as an author) for a series of sentences.
 - Example: Don’t write several sentences starting “Fitzgerald characterizes...Fitzgerald writes...Fitzgerald’s symbolism relies upon...”
 - Instead, find subjects that can replace Fitzgerald and use the passive voice to vary the structure of the sentences like so: “Daisy *is characterized as*...Fitzgerald constructs...The novel’s symbolism relies upon...”

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- Note that we use the passive voice sparingly even in instances such as these to avoid the monotony of too many passive voice constructions in a row.

When the subject acted upon is more significant than the actor:

- This is especially common when the reader already knows who or what the actor is from the previous sentence or clause and it isn't necessary to reiterate their identity.
- The passive voice is italicized in the following example: "Prebisch considered the desire of Latin American business and political elites to mimic the lifestyles of their counterparts in the global north counter-productive, viewing it as yet another pressure leading to low savings rates and a meager capital accumulation process. If their wealth *was invested* into the local economy, more industrial jobs could have been created, boosting aggregate demand and reinvigorating the economy."
 - In the first sentence, written in the active voice, "Prebisch" is our actor/subject. Since the two sentences describe his ideas, it is essential that this is stated immediately to avoid plagiarism.
 - In the second sentence, since we already know whose wealth is in question from the first sentence, we gain a clearer and more concise sentence by using the passive voice to emphasize "wealth" by making it an acted upon subject.
 - If we preserved the active voice, we would have to repeat ourselves by writing "If Latin American business and political elites invested their wealth..."

When professor expectations or your major's writing standards require passive voice constructions:

While for a time formal writing in the sciences mandated passive voice in order to create a more objective tone, major scientific journals such as *Nature* and *Science* increasingly recommend the active voice instead, even if it means the occasional personal pronoun (I, we, you, they, he, she). Leading style guides from the American Medical Association and American Psychological Association similarly recommend the active voice. (for more information on active and passive voices in the sciences, see the Bio Medical Editor links below.)

Nonetheless, there are assignments for which many science professors recommend the passive voice, particularly lab reports. This is because otherwise, students often end up over-using personal pronouns, which can lead to a less objective tone. (for more information see Objective Tone versus Subjective Tone handout at <http://www.sfsu.edu/~carp1/helpfulhandouts.htm>)

- For example, in a summary of procedures "The prepared lens was placed under the microscope" has a more scientific tone than "I prepared the lens and then I placed it under the microscope."

Similarly, professors in San Francisco State's Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM) department sometimes prefer the passive voice to the active voice in sections detailing original research (e.g., observations, surveys, etc.)

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- “Employees were observed during both busy and slow points in the day” is preferable to the less formal “We observed employees...” or the unfortunately worded “Observers observed employees...”

Practice

Modify the following sentences from the passive voice to active. You may need to add a subject which is implied by the passive constructions below. In these cases, don't be concerned if your subject doesn't match the key's; just make sure the sentence structure is the same.

- 1) Mistakes were made.
- 2) Flanagan's conclusions were found invalid by many scholars.
- 3) The active voice was rarely used in the paper's first draft.
- 4) The political dynamic was miscalculated by the Starks.
- 5) Tywin was caught off guard by Tyrion.
- 6) Gender was constructed by societies, not nature.
- 7) Unions were created to defend workers' rights.
- 8) The crash was caused by Wall Street speculation, not ordinary homeowners and consumers.
- 9) Bilbo was convinced to leave the Shire by Gandalf's prodding.
- 10) Frodo was convinced to travel to Mordor by the threat Sauron posed to Middle-Earth.

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Answer Key

- 1) We made mistakes.
- 2) Many scholars found Flanagan's conclusions invalid.
- 3) The student rarely used the active voice in the paper's first draft.
- 4) The Starks miscalculated the political dynamic.
- 5) Tyrion caught Tywin off guard.
- 6) Societies constructed gender, not nature.
- 7) Activists created unions to defend workers' rights.
- 8) Wall Street speculation caused the crash, not ordinary homeowners and consumers.
- 9) Gandalf's prodding convinced Bilbo to leave the Shire.
- 10) The threat Sauron posed to Middle-Earth convinced Frodo to travel to Mordor.

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