

Campus Academic Resource Program

Active and Passive Voice

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|--|--------|---------|
| 2. The beanstalk was grown by Jack. | Active | Passive |
| 3. When climbing up the water spout, the itzy-bitsy spider slipped. | Active | Passive |
| 4. The amount of wood chucked by woodchucks is recorded on a nearby tree. | Active | Passive |
| 5. Little Miss Muffet had been eating her curds and whey for hours before she noticed the spider beside her. | Active | Passive |

The Advantages of the Active Voice

Consider the difference between the following statements:

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

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

- **Brevity/concision:** Sentence 1 and 2 use the same amount of words. However, sentence 2 provides significantly more detail by answering the question: Who crossed the road? While we could use the passive voice while explaining who crossed the road, we would have to lengthen the sentence to “The intersection was walked across by me.” That uses 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 because the subject is unclear, and sentence 2 does not.
- **Clarity:** Sentence 2’s meaning is most clearly conveyed because it immediately presents the subject, verb, and then the completed thought. The longer it takes to delineate the subject, verb, and completed thought, the less clear a sentence is. Avoid implication as much as you can.
 - The passive voice is also more likely to create “hedging” sentences. These occur when the author either is not 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.

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- 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” does not hedge.

When to Use the Passive Voice

Despite these advantages of using 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: Do not 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...”
 - 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 is not 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 to create a more objective tone, major scientific journals such as *Nature* and *Science* increasingly recommend the active voice

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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 in the Works Cited 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 Subjective and Objective Tone at <http://carp.sfsu.edu>)

- 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.)

- “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...”

Exercise 2

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, do not be concerned if your subject does not 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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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.

Exercise 2:

1. Active
 2. Passive
 3. Active
 4. Passive
 5. Active
- *Note that this sentence's active form can vary.
- We recorded the amount of wood chucked by woodchucks on a nearby tree.

Answer Key:

1. Active
 2. Passive
 3. Active
 4. Passive
 5. Active
- Jack grew the beanstalk.

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