



Center for
Writing and
Speaking

S NO. 9 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Passive Voice vs Active Voice

Passive voice has earned itself a reputation for being a mark of clumsy writing. However, there are instances where passive voice can help a writer and may even be preferred by a reader. This handout will help you recognize the passive versus active voice and when to use each.

What is passive voice?

Contrary to popular opinion, passive voice is not a grammatical error in writing. Passive voice is used when the subject, or actor, of a sentence is being acted upon rather than doing the action themselves. See handout S5 Subject-Verb Agreement to learn how to find the subject in a sentence.

- Example: *"Milk was spilled on the carpet in the basement."*
 - In this case, the subject in the sentence is "milk", yet the action of spilling is being done *upon* it, making it passive.

There are a few indications of passive voice that you can use to recognize when it appears in your writing. One common indicator is that passive voice is sometimes accompanied by the use of any form of the verb/phrase "to be" or the preposition "by." However, this is not always the case and the use of these words does not automatically mean passive voice is present.

Some other common myths about passive voice include:

- The passive voice is never used in first person
- You should never use passive voice

What is active voice?

Active voice is when the subject of the sentence is performing the action. Active voice is used for most non-scientific writing, though there are exceptions. It is more concise than passive voice and clearly states the subject of the sentence, removing possible confusion. The importance of using active voice lies in its ability to create clarity and reduce unnecessary words.

- Example: *Mac and Mary spilled milk on the basement carpet.*
 - The previous example is turned active by changing the subject to "Mac and Mary" and clarifying that they are the subjects doing the spilling.

How to turn passive voice into active voice

You can change the passive voice into the active voice by allowing the subject to perform the action presented in the verb, instead of an indirect or direct object (which are bolded in the examples below).

- Passive: *"The **cat** was fed"* or *"the **cat** was fed by me."*
 - Active: *"I fed the **cat**."*
- Passive: *"The **treasure** was found."*
 - Active: *"Indiana Jones found the **treasure**."*

(continued on reverse)

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Passive Voice vs Active Voice, Continued

When is it better to use passive voice?

There are a few examples of times when passive voice is preferred by the writer or reader. A few of these times include:

- Scientific papers – the focus should be on the scientific method, not the experimenter
- If the writer does not know who the actor performing the action is
- In creative writing, this could create a sense of mystery
- If the person being acted upon is more important than the actor

Over time and with practice, it will become easier to recognize the difference between passive and active writing. Try to deliberately search it out within your papers and be intentional in which voice you decide to use.

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