



ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

Good writing is direct and the active voice achieves directness better than the passive voice. This handout shows you how to ensure that your writing is in the active voice.

Voice is the quality in verbs that shows whether a subject acts or is acted upon.

Example: The fire destroyed the building. [The subject, fire, is the actor.]
 The building was destroyed by the fire. [The subject, building, is being acted upon.]

When a verb is in the active voice, the subject performs the action and the object receives the action. When a verb is in the passive voice, the subject receives the action.

Example: William Faulkner won a Pulitzer Prize in 1963. [Active voice]
 A Pulitzer Prize was won by William Faulkner in 1963. [Passive Voice]

*Though both sentences are grammatically correct, the first is much clearer to the reader.

In most situations, you should use the active voice for several reasons:

- The active voice is more concise.
- The active voice emphasizes the actual subject and is, therefore, more direct.
- The active voice is more forceful.

Strong writing requires active verbs. Limit your use of passive verbs to the infrequent occasions when they are appropriate.

An active verb has these advantages over a passive verb.

1. It conveys conviction.

Example: The project is expected to be completed on time. [Passive Voice]
 We expect to complete the project on time. [Active Voice]

2. It is personal rather than impersonal.

Example: It is believed that you are deserving of an 'A.' [Passive Voice]
 I believe you deserve an 'A.' [Active Voice]

3. It acknowledges responsibility.

Example: You were misjudged. [Passive Voice]
 I misjudged you. [Active Voice]

4. It can shorten a sentence made longer than necessary by passive verbs.

Example: Merchandise was marked down because of poor retail sales. [Passive Voice]
 Poor retail sales forced markdowns of merchandise. [Active Voice]

Certain situations and disciplines, however, call for passive voice. These are examples of when a passive verb may be used to advantage:

1. You do not want to name the ‘actor’ of the action – as in a political speech.

Example: The alternatives have been exhausted. [Passive Voice]
 This government tried everything else first. [Active Voice]

2. You do not know the ‘actor’ of the action.

Example: The fire alarm was set off by mistake. [Passive Voice]
 Someone set off the fire alarm by mistake. [Active Voice]

3. You want to give the receiver of the action more importance than the ‘actor’ of the action.

4. Example: Our brand name is widely recognized. [Passive Voice]
 Many people recognize our brand name. [Active Voice]

5. When you want to emphasize the action itself.

Example: A curved incision was made behind the hairline so the scar would be concealed when the hair grew back. [Passive Voice]
 The doctor made a curved incision behind the hairline... [Active Voice]