Passive Voice

Most students of English writing hear a lot about passive voice, but rarely does anyone explain it thoroughly. When and why should you use it or not use it? How do you tell if a sentence is in passive voice or not? Most of all, what is it? This handout should help demystify passive voice for you.

What Is "Passive Voice?"
The active voice and passive voice are types of sentence structures. The main difference between the two lies in how the subject and object are organized within the sentence. In the active voice, the writer clearly links the subject to the action of the sentence. In the passive voice, the writer puts more emphasis on the object’s relationship to the action. Confused? Look at these examples of the different structures of active and passive sentences.

Example 1

Active: Professors give students grades.

Passive: Students are given grades.

In the active voice sentence, the subject (“Professors”) is doing the action (“give”). In the passive sentence, the actor (who is giving the grades) is not in the sentence anymore. Instead, the object of the action—the person, place, or thing that is having the action done to it—is in the subject position. The active sentence emphasizes the professors’ relationship to the action, and the passive sentence emphasizes the students’ relationship to the action.

Example 2

Active: They founded UT Dallas in 1969.

Passive: UT Dallas was founded in 1969.

This example follows the same principle. Since UT Dallas is being founded, it is the object, the recipient of the action. Since “they” are founding UT Dallas, they are the actor doing the action. The first sentence emphasizes the actor, and the second sentence emphasizes the object.

Should I Avoid Using Passive Voice?
Your professor might ask you to avoid passive voice because it can cause confusion and lack clarity. It might also mean that you do not convey your argument to the reader.

In American academic discourse, most people consider passive voice to be generally inappropriate when writing in an academic discipline outside the sciences. However, different
style guides make different demands on writers. Many people use passive voice when writing in the sciences because they think it sounds more objective—you do not have to use personal pronouns. However, APA style recommends the active voice over the passive voice, even when that results in the use of personal pronouns.

*Passive:* The experiment was conducted over the course of three months.  
*Active:* We conducted the experiment over the course of three months.

*Passive:* The Great Gatsby was written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in the early 1920s.  
*Active:* F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote The Great Gatsby in the early 1920s.

However, there is one instance in which it is always inappropriate to use passive voice: when shifting from active to passive voice results in a shift in the subject. Look at this example:

*Inconsistent:* The Galapagos Islands are home to a wide array of species. Unique opportunities for research are provided by these islands.  
*Consistent:* The Galapagos Islands are home to a wide array of species and provide unique opportunities for research.

The inconsistent example takes one actor doing two actions and splits it into two sentences: the first in active voice, the second in passive voice. To be more concise, combine the two sentences into active voice.

**What are some ways you can identify passive voice?**

Passive structures usually have a form of "to be" followed by a past participle. This does not mean the sentence has to be past tense. This also does not mean that every sentence with "to be" is passive. Here are some examples.

- *will be* + past participle
  You'll be told where your lost comet card is.

- *are/am/is* + past participle
  Research is done here.

- *was/were* + past participle
  He was invited to the workshop.

Do you see problems with these sentences? Who is doing the research? Who invited him to the workshop? Who will tell you where your lost comet card is? By avoiding passive voice, you will also be able to give your reader more information.

**When is it appropriate to use passive voice?**

If you are unsure about whether passive voice is acceptable in any given paper, ask your professor. However, it is sometimes acceptable to use passive voice when writing in the physical
and natural sciences and in some social sciences. Consult your style guide, and remember that American styles subscribe to different conventions than British or other international styles. In the following example, the writer uses the passive voice to describe an action in an experiment.

*Ex:* The catalyst *was poured* at a steady rate.

It is acceptable to use passive voice when dealing with an unknown subject. We may not need to know who is doing the action. In the following example, the actor, who introduced garlic, is both irrelevant and impossible to name, so the writer uses passive voice.

*Ex:* Garlic *has been introduced* into the cuisine of many cultures around the world.

It is acceptable to use passive voice when stressing the importance of the object over the subject. In the following example, there are two different actors, but the object is the more important part of the sentence.

*Ex:* Rome *was sacked* by the Visigoths in 410 and again by the Vandals in 455.

Here is another example of the recipient of an action being more important than the actor:

What happened to your magnolia tree?
Our magnolia tree *was struck* by lightning.

In this case, the sentence is about the magnolia tree, not about the lightning, so the writer puts the magnolia tree, the recipient of the action, in the subject position.

**Reference**

**Contact**
Want to work on avoiding passive voice? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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