Active and Passive Voice

ACTIVE VOICE

**Definition:** The subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb.

**Use it:** when writing most types of papers, like argument, summary, or creative writing. Active voice is generally easier to read and sounds more powerful.

![Diagram of active voice]

**Example:** The chemist conducted experiments on phosphorous.

Theresa swung the bat as hard as she could.

PASSIVE VOICE

**Definition:** The subject is receiving the action of the verb (the action is being done to the subject).

- Passive Verb Pattern: [a form of the verb "to be"] + [verb in past tense]
- The person or thing performing the action is not always included in the sentence. If it is included, it will come after the verb in a prepositional phrase that begins with "by."

**Use it:** mostly in genres such as research papers or lab reports, where it is inappropriate to use the words “I” or “we.” Passive voice emphasizes the object/thing receiving the action, not the person/thing doing the action. Therefore, sometimes passive voice is used when the person/thing doing the action is unknown or unimportant.

![Diagram of passive voice]

**Example:** The experiment was conducted by the chemist.
The bat was swung by Theresa.

**Passive voice without the person/thing doing the action:** This is used when (1) we know the action happened, but do not know who or what did it, (2) it is not important to know who did it, just important to know that the action happened, or (3) because it is inappropriate to use "I:"

![Diagram of passive voice without the person/thing doing the action]

**Example:** The evidence was included in the report.
**Passive voice and vague subjects/objects:** In academic writing, you will probably encounter complex sentences where the subject or object is not immediately obvious. This might include the pronoun "It." Remember to identify the action and ask yourself who or what is performing that action.

![Diagram](image)

It has long been argued that too much screen time is bad for children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Passive verb</th>
<th>Phrase represented by &quot;it&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**ACTIVE VOICE THAT LOOKS LIKE PASSIVE VOICE**

**Note:** Do not assume sentences are using passive voice just because they have a similar verb pattern of [a form of the verb "to be"] + [verb ending in "-ing"].

Remember, the main thing that separates passive from active voice is whether the subject is doing the action or receiving the action.

![Diagram](image)

The committee was considering the proposal. The car is baking under the sun.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject doing the action</th>
<th>Active verb</th>
<th>Subject doing the action</th>
<th>Active verb</th>
</tr>
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</table>

**WHICH ONE IS BETTER?**

That depends on the situation. What you’ve probably learned is that academic papers should avoid passive writing completely. This is because active voice makes your writing sound more direct, so when you’re writing research papers that support an argumentative thesis statement, you want your sentences to have more force.

But scientific papers usually require passive voice. This is because passive voice takes the agent (in this case, the person who did the experiment) out of the writing. So your lab report should focus less on you, the scientist, and more on 1) presenting the results of the experiment or study and 2) making it easy for readers to follow your process and repeat the experiment themselves to see if they can replicate your results. That’s how the scientific community tends to communicate its information.

Passive voice also has a place in creative writing. Sometimes an author may want to hide which character performed a certain action, or show that the character is distancing him/herself from that action. The author may also decide that passive voice is better for the tone or mood of the story, or that passive sentence structure just sounds better in the rhythm of the story.