



Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

A-State Online Writing Center

Active voice

Using active voice involves a sentence where the subject carries out an action as outlined by the choice of verb. This is preferred across writing disciplines when possible because it typically makes the sentence more direct and clearer.

Passive voice

Using passive voice involves the subject being acted upon by the verb or verb phrase. You can transform sentences into passive voice by changing the order of the sentence so that the subject and direct object are switched.

Examples:

Active: *The man ate the apple.*

Passive: *The apple was eaten by the man.*

Do you see how we switched the subject and the direct object in the passive voice example? If this is confusing, you can ask yourself: Who ate the apple? The apple was eaten by whom? The “who” / “whom” is the man. When you ask yourself these questions, you can see how you can then turn passive voice into active voice when writing.

Active: *The squirrels steal apples from people.*

Passive: *People were robbed of their apples by the squirrels.*

The sentence using passive voice is wordier, uses more prepositions, and isn't as coherent or direct as the active voice example. As previously stated, this is why active voice is usually preferred.

Active: *Annie placed the discarded apples in the trash.*

Passive: *The discarded apples were placed in the trash by Annie.*

When should you use passive voice?

Passive voice can be useful in various scenarios. For instance, if you don't know who was performing an action or you are intentionally omitting the subject, you can use passive voice. Also, passive voice is helpful if you prefer to emphasize the action taken or object more so than the subject. This has been particularly true in scientific reports and research papers, especially in the Materials and Methods section of lab reports. As always, take cues from your professor or the institution you are submitting papers to for guidance.

Examples

1. *Mentos were dropped into the Diet Coke bottle so students could view the chemical reaction.*
2. *Soda water was invented by Joseph Priestley in the 18th century.*

In both of these examples, the focus is on the action taken more so than who performed it.

With that being said, you can easily flip these examples to reflect active voice:

1. *The teacher dropped Mentos into the Diet Coke bottle so students could view the chemical reaction.*
2. *Joseph Priestley invented soda water in the 18th century.*

Works Consulted

- https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/style/ccs_activevoice/
- <https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/activepass.htm>
- <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/passive-voice/>
- <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/types-of-writing/active-voice-in-science/>

More Resources

- <https://unilearning.uow.edu.au/academic/3avi.html>
- <https://www.englishclub.com/grammar/sentence/direct-object.htm>
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/active_and_passive_voice/active_versus_passive_voice.html
- <http://www.biomedicaleditor.com/passive-voice.html>