
Passive Voice

Active Voice

If the subject of a sentence also performs the verb action (is the agent of the verb), then the verb is in the active voice:

Some people in the class read the article.
subject/agent verb object

In it, Gearey criticized the findings from the newest studies.
subject/agent verb object

Passive Voice

If the subject of a sentence receives the action of the verb, then the verb is in passive voice:

The article was read by some of the class.
subject verb agent

In it, the findings from the newest studies were criticized by Gearey.
subject verb agent

The article was ignored.
subject verb

Passive voice will always use a form of the verb “to be” (am, is, was, etc), but not all sentences containing a form of “to be” are in passive voice. Overusing passive voice can make a paper awkward and unclear for a couple of reasons. First, it always necessitates the use of another verb, making a sentence wordier. Second, it frequently excludes the agent of the verb, which is often important information. Normally, using active voice is more concise, more straightforward, and gives the reader the most important information.

Changing Passive to Active

In order to change a sentence from the passive to the active voice, you should find the agent of the verb and make it the sentence’s subject:

Passive: *This call for mutual aid is extended in Article 4.*
subject verb agent

Active: *Article 4 extends this call for mutual aid.*
subject/agent verb object

In this next example, a form of the verb “to be” is still present in the active version of the sentence:

Passive: *The waiter is being called by the person raising her hand.*
subject verb agent

Active: *The person raising her hand is calling the waiter.*
subject/agent verb object

Now, a slightly different example:

Passive: *Mellor looks at Dorothy Wordsworth’s poetry, which is described as Romantic by her.*
subject/agent verb object verb

Active: *Mellor looks at Dorothy Wordsworth's poetry, which she describes as Romantic.*
subject/agent verb object s/a verb

Part of that sentence was already in active voice. Voice should be consistent in a sentence.

Sometimes passive voice can produce dangling modifiers, or descriptions whose subject is unclear. Take a look at this sentence, now without the parts of speech labeled:

Passive: *Being woken, the erupting Vesuvius was seen by him.*

Active: *Waking, he saw the erupting Vesuvius.*

It is impossible to tell from the sentence in passive who or what is “being woken.”

The passive version of this sentence has no agent. When the agent is important, and known, active voice is clearer:

Passive: *The telephone was first patented in 1875.*

Active: *Alexander Graham Bell first patented the telephone in 1875.*

An Argument for the Passive

Passive voice does not always need to be avoided. In scientific writing, passive voice is common and sometimes necessary. In experiments and research, the results are generally more important than the people involved. Passive voice creates a more objective tone by omitting, or de-emphasizing, the human agents. When talking about an experiment, one could use several active constructions:

Active: *We determined the boiling temperature through application of the equation.* (uses the first person)

Active: *The application of the equation determined the boiling temperature.* (awkward and confusing)

Passive: *The boiling temperature was determined through application of the equation.*

The final example is clearest, since the reader of a lab report probably has a greater interest in what the boiling temperature is than he or she does in either the people involved or the equation used. Thus, in addition to creating a more formal tone, passive voice may also be used when the writer wishes to emphasize the receiver of the action, rather than the agent. For instance, look at this sentence:

Cults were studied by marketers in order to create new advertising techniques.

Cults, not typically well-regarded, are actually undergoing study by marketers; since that is the most interesting thing communicated by the sentence, it makes sense to make “cults” the subject, instead of the object, of the sentence.

Passive voice may be preferable when the agent of the verb is unknown, irrelevant, or obvious, or when there are many agents:

The student's new plasma television was stolen. (agent unknown: mysterious thief)

The baby was delivered at 4:30 PM. (agent irrelevant, depending on context: a doctor)

In Macbeth Banquo is written as a sympathetic character. (agent obvious: Shakespeare)

Data was collected once a week for the past two years. (many agents: a team of researchers)