



**ACTIVE AND PASSIVE
VOICE
IN ACADEMIC WRITING**

Consider for a moment:

1. What do the terms “active voice” and “passive voice” refer to?
2. What do you understand about how they are used in academic writing?

HOW DO ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICES DIFFER?

In sentences written in the **active voice**, the subject performs the action expressed in the verb:

Smith (2017) has recently reviewed the literature on this topic.

In passive sentences, the subject of the sentence is acted upon by some other agent or by something unnamed:

The literature on this topic has recently been reviewed by Smith (2017).

Or (omitting the agent)

The literature on this topic has recently been reviewed (Smith 2017).

The passive voice is commonly used in scientific or technical writing:

“The data can be analysed in various ways.”

Why do you think this is the case?

The passive voice also allows the writer to avoid personal pronouns or the names of particular researchers as subjects of sentences, thereby creating a sense of objectivity.

I estimated the size of the population

→ The size of the population was estimated.

This problem has been overlooked. (no agent)

Could there be any drawbacks in using the passive voice?

- Overuse of the passive can create rather awkward and dull text that quickly loses the interest of the reader.
- Changing to the active voice can improve clarity, conciseness and directness of the text.
- Some journals encourage or require the use of the active voice

See: <http://www.biomedicaleditor.com/active-voice.html>

MOVING FROM ACTIVE TO PASSIVE

It may be preferable to omit the agent, or to shift the focus from the actor to the process, by converting from the active to passive voice:

I have broken your laptop → Your laptop has been broken (agent omitted)

Can you convert these sentences to the passive voice?

1. The leaders are seeking a fair resolution to the crisis
2. Scientists have discovered traces of ice on the surface of Mars
3. One third of students failed the exam

MOVING FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE

Moving from the passive to the active voice can be more difficult, especially if the agent is omitted from the passive sentence.

Can you convert the following from the passive to the active voice?

1. The book is being read by most of the class
2. Results will be published in the next issue of the journal
3. An experimental heart operation was successfully performed yesterday

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

The following short videos explore the use of the active and passive voice in academic or scientific English, providing some excellent examples:

- Should I Use Active or Passive Voice in a Research Paper?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHZ1Xve3au0>

- Active Versus Passive Voice in Scientific Writing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvkJWv6RQ1I>

PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. **Excerpt from FAO report (separate handout):** Identify which sentences are in the active or passive voice. Is one voice more common overall? What do you think influences the choice in individual sentences?
2. Practice in moving between active and passive voice (**separate handout**)
3. **Voice in scientific articles.** Select a quantitative academic journal article from the e-library (i.e. one with an introduction, methods, results, discussion). Review the patterns of use of active and passive voice in the separate sections. What could explain the patterns you observe?
4. Working with your essay from part 1, examine how you have used the active and passive voice. Are there any sentences where you feel that the voice (focus) could be changed? How would you rewrite these sentences?