



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Understanding Passive Voice

Understanding Passive vs. Active Voice

In English, all sentences are written in either passive or active voice. Active voice is the more common “SVO” (subject-verb-object) arrangement. In this order, the agent (person or thing doing the action) is known and appears before the verb. Passive voice, on the other hand, switches the order of sentence elements to “OVS” or sometimes just “OV.”

- **Active voice (SVO):** Drew (S) threw (V) the ball (O).
 - The focus of this sentence is Drew.
- **Passive voice (OVS):** The ball (O) was thrown (V) by Drew (S).
 - Now, the focus has shifted to the ball even though Drew is still the agent.
- **Passive voice (OV):** The ball (O) was thrown (V).
 - Here, the agent is absent, and it's unclear who threw the ball.

Why We Avoid Passive Voice

Generally, readers prefer active voice, both for clarity and concision. Passive sentences often sound wordy and indirect and make the reader work harder to understand. And since they are usually longer than active sentences, passive sentences take up precious room. Additionally, academic writing often focuses on the ideas of different researchers or the relationship between the writer's ideas and those of the researchers being discussed: Too many passive sentences can create confusion about who did, said, or thought what.

Identifying Passive Voice

Use the following indicators to recognize and reduce or eliminate excessive passive voice:

- It is unclear **who or what is responsible for the action:**
 - Her car was broken into. (by whom?)
- The **object** of the action is in the subject slot of the sentence:
 - **Her car** was broken into by the shady neighbor.
- A sentence combines a **form of “to be”** (e.g., is, was, are, be, been, being) with a **past or future tense verb:**
 - Her window **was shattered** during the break-in.
 - Her window **will be fixed** by a repairman.

Using Passive Voice Appropriately

Shifting the focus of a sentence from the agent to the object is sometimes necessary or rhetorically advantageous. Passive voice is appropriate and sometimes ideal in these situations:

- The agent is literally unknown:
 - “Stonehenge was built in England.”
- The agent is irrelevant:
 - “The garden was tilled to prepare it for planting.”
- The writer wants to be vague about who is responsible:
 - “Mistakes were made.”
- The object is simply more important than the agent:
 - “Insulin was discovered in 1921 and is the only treatment for diabetes.”
- The writer wants to maintain sentence-to-sentence cohesion (Known-New Contract)
 - “The most valuable item we own is the Chinese vase. Unfortunately, that vase was broken by my baby brother.”
 - In this example, the second sentence is constructed in passive voice so that the element ending the first sentence is the subject in the next. This makes the writer’s thought process easier to follow.
- The writing is in a scientific genre that prefers passive voice (often done in Materials & Methods sections)
 - “The solution was dissolved in 20 ml of water.”
 - Passive voice emphasizes the experimental process rather than the experimenter

For information on related concepts, please see the following handouts:

- Principles of Scientific Writing
- Dependent Clauses
- Independent Clauses