

Active and Passive Voice

In many college papers, your professors will encourage you to write in something called “active voice.” Active voice means you avoid passive verbs. Passive verbs are any form of the verb “to be:”

- Am
- Is
- Are
- Was
- Were
- Be
- Being
- Been

These passive verbs plus a past participle (which looks like a past-tense verb) create what is called “passive voice.”. Below are a few examples of active vs passive verbs:

Passive Voice	Active Voice
Is thrown/was thrown	Throw
Is thought/had been thought	Thought
Be influenced/was influenced	Influenced

Here are those example words in sentences:

Passive Voice	Active Voice
The ball was thrown by the boy.	The boy threw the ball.
In <i>The Hobbit</i> , Bilbo was thought by Gandalf to be influenced by the Ring’s power.	In <i>The Hobbit</i> , Gandalf thought the Ring’s power influenced Bilbo.

The passive voice sentence structure still creates grammatically correct sentences, so why do we tend to avoid it? Passive voice tends to be wordy, and it can become difficult to tell who is doing what. Now, for a caveat: though we tend to encourage writing in the active voice, passive voice is not always “bad.” In some fields, such as science writing, passive voice tends to be the norm. In research papers, using passive voice is purposeful and allows the reader to focus on the research actions rather than the actor.

For example: *The water fleas (Daphnia Magna) were separated into small cups.*

In the example above, *who* performed the action is less important than the action. If the sentence needed to be in the active voice, the sentence would be something like:

The scientist separated the water fleas (Daphnia Magna) into small cups.



There are some instances when we use the passive verbs without past-tense verbs, like when we describe something. This looks like passive voice, but it isn't; however, in the technical writing field, this sentence may be considered passive. For example: *The car is red.*

This sentence can possibly be rewritten as: *Tom drives a red car.*

Sample Sentences

Passive Voice	Active Voice
Ethos was used by the author to grab the readers' attention.	"The author used ethos to grab the readers' attention."
"More research needs to be done to improve and discover new ways of remotely sensing hydrologic processes."	"Scientists must research further to improve and discover new ways of remotely sensing hydrologic processes."
"These sentences were written to clarify the rules."	"I wrote these sentences to clarify the rules."

When in doubt, outside audiences are good ways to test your writing for clarity and polish. When looking for passive voice, as the writer, you may be too involved in what the paper is supposed to say, so an outside reader can give you the perspective of what the audience might see or understand. In the Writing Center, our tutors are happy to be that reader! To set an appointment with a Writing Center tutor, contact us:

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