

Active and Passive Voice

In many college papers, your professors will encourage you to write in active voice. Active voice means you avoid passive verbs, which are any form of the verb “to be” (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) plus a passive participle (which looks like a past-tense verb). Below are a few examples of active vs passive verbs:

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

Here are those example words in sentences:

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

Passive voice tends to be wordy, and it can become difficult to tell who is doing what. Though we tend to write in active voice, passive voice is not always “bad”. In some fields, such as science writing, passive voice tends to be the norm. The passive voice in research papers is purposeful and allows the reader to focus on the research 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

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