



Using the Active and Passive Voice

Active and passive voice are two different ways of communicating your thoughts to the reader. The usage of one voice over the other is not a matter of grammatically accuracy, but one of clarity and style. Usually, it is preferable to write in the active voice as it is direct in its address, crisp and clear. However, this is not to say that this is always the case. In certain instances within academic writing, passive voice is still practiced and in certain cases more appropriate than the active voice. Read on below how to identify and differentiate between active and passive voice, and when to use which voice.

Understanding the Active and Passive Voice

In its simplest form, a sentence is made up of a subject (the doer in the sentence), verb (the action being done), and object (the receiver of the action). For example,

Subject	Verb	Object
Sheetal Sharma	developed	an automated watering system.
The university	built	new courtyards across the campus.

Notice how both sentences are broken into subject, verb, and object. In the first sentence, Sheetal Sharma is the subject because she does something (develops) and the receiver of the action is the object (the watering system). Similarly, in the second sentence the university is the subject because it is the doer within the sentence and the new courtyards are the object because they are the receiver of the university's action.



When a sentence is written in the order of subject, verb, and object then those sentences are active voice sentences. Active voice sentences are those in which the doer is the subject and the receiver of the action is the object, as shown above. Let us rework the examples given above to understand how the object of the sentence can become the subject and the original subject becomes a by-phrase.

Subject	Verb	by-phrase
An automated watering system	was developed	by Sheetal Sharma.
Across the campus, new courtyards	were built	by the university.

When the subject-object position is reversed, as shown above, we call it passive voice. Note that the usage of the ‘by-phrase’ is there as a placeholder to make it easier to understand how subjects and objects switch places when written in the passive voice.

When to Use the Passive or Active Voice

We use active voice when we want to be assertive, direct, and/or focus on the doer within the sentence. Conversely, passive voice is used when the doer within the sentence is unknown, insignificant, and/or we wish to focus on the receiver.



Let's look at the examples below.

Example no.		
1	Active	<i>Huckleberry Finn is portrayed as a lovable ruffian</i>
	Passive	<i>Twain presents Huckleberry Finn as a lovable ruffian."</i>
2	Active	<i>In the twentieth century, religion came to be seen as an obstacle in the path of development.</i>
	Passive	<i>In the twentieth century, Westernized intellectual elites of the third world saw religion as opposing development.</i>
3	Active	<i>It can be seen in Taylor's writings that modern individualism is built on a strong moral foundation</i>
	Passive	<i>Taylor's writings show that modern individualism stands on a strong moral foundation.</i>

In the above cases, it would be preferable to use the active voice. It is direct and assertive. Here, the first example shies away from making a direct comment about Twain's writing by using the passive construction. The passive, therefore, may reflect a writer who is unsure about the argument she wants to make. It is also often a symptom of unclear thinking. In the second example, for instance, it is unclear *who* saw religion as obstructing development, and in this case it would be important to know who saw it as such. As the third example shows, the passive construction adds too much distance between the reader and the meaning being communicated.



As noted above, the passive voice is used when the doer within the sentence is unknown, unwanted or insignificant. Whenever the receiver within the passage needs to be underscored, we will use the passive voice. Similarly, the writer may want to emphasize the action in the sentence, rather than the doer of the action. As in the example, below:

Biological diversity is considered a crucial survival issue by Professor Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University.

In this case, it would be best to leave the sentence in the passive voice. The topic under discussion is most likely biological diversity and it being a crucial survival issue (the action) is what is important here. The doer of the action (Wilson) is added for validity and substance but may not be as important as the topic under discussion.

Sometimes, the writer may not want to use the first person pronoun, which is often the case in academic writing. Writers will use the passive voice in order to avoid using first person sentences. Or the writer may simply want to add variety to his/her sentences.

As such, when deciding which voice to employ, always try to determine which voice gives more clarity and weightage to your writing.



Conclusion

Remember that the usage of one voice over the other is a matter of clarity and style, not a matter of being grammatically correct. Use passive voice when you want to focus on an object, the doer within the sentence is either unknown or insignificant, and when you want to shift the focus away from the doer. Active voice will be used in the opposite situations as listed for passive voice.

If you are unsure as to which voice will suit your writing better, then ask your professor or a friend, or visit the writing center.