

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

We refer to a sentence as being in the “**active voice**” when the subject is performing the action of the sentence (the verb). A sentence is in the “**passive voice**” when the subject is being acted upon by the verb. For example, the following sentence is in the active voice: “She ate the hamburger.” *She* is the subject, and *she* is doing the *eating*. On the other hand, this sentence is in the passive voice: “The hamburger was being eaten by her.” *The hamburger* is the subject, and it’s *being eaten*, or being acted upon, by the verb. What was the original subject in the active-voice sentence is now relegated to being the object of the sentence.

Many of us have been taught to avoid using the passive voice at all costs, but following this rule doesn't always make an essay better! Instead, you need to remember these two basic principles:

1. **Using the active voice emphasizes the person or agent who performs an action**
2. **Using the passive voice emphasizes the recipient of the action, or sometimes the action itself.**

Take a look at the examples below to see how active voice is not always superior to passive voice.

Passive: *Atlas.ti software was used for qualitative data analysis.*

Active: *The researchers used Atlas.ti software for qualitative data analysis.*

The active option, which uses the third person (“the researchers”), is grammatically correct but sounds a bit awkward. Again, the authors of this article are emphasizing aspects of their methodology, one of which is their software choice. Thus, their use of the passive voice is acceptable and appropriate.

Passive: *The methods and principles by which each process in product synthesis could be analyzed were proposed by Choudhary.*

Active: *Choudhary proposed the methods and principles by which each process in product synthesis could be analyzed.*

In this case, the active voice is the better choice. The literature review section of a paper often seeks to delineate the most important contributions in the field, which makes actors/agents/authors important. In the example above, the active sentence reads much more clearly and concisely.

Five Times to Use Passive Voice:

1. To emphasize the action rather than the actor
 - a. Example: *After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by the planning committee.*
2. To keep the subject and focus consistent throughout a passage
 - a. Example: *The data processing department presented what proved to be a controversial proposal to expand its staff. After long debate, the proposal was endorsed by...*
3. To be tactful by not naming the actor
 - a. Example: *Mistakes were made.*
4. To describe a condition in which the actor is unknown or unimportant
 - a. Example: *Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed as having cancer.*
5. To create an authoritative tone
 - a. Example: *Visitors are not allowed after 9:00 p.m.*

Credit: Adapted from "Grammar Crash Course Packet," Kalee Hall, The Writing Center

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