



Active vs. Passive Voice

I N T R O

Passive voice places emphasis on the object instead of the subject of a sentence. Though writers are commonly discouraged from using passive voice for the sake of clarity, there are instances in which passive voice is the best option. This handout will discuss proper uses, functions, and form of passive voice.

B A S I C S

Active voice—the subject is the *do-er* or *be-er*

- *The executive committee approved the new policy.*

Passive voice—the subject is neither a *do-er* or *be-er*, but is acted upon by another agent or by something unnamed; it receives the action of the verb.

- The new policy was approved by the executive committee.

F O R M

- The passive form of a verb consists of two parts: *be* + past participle of the main verb
 - The take-home exam was distributed in class last week.
- Can use phrases that begin with *by* to express the subject of the active sentence
 - The take-home exam was distributed by the professor.
- The subject of a passive sentence is the direct object of the equivalent active sentence
 - Active: The professor distributed the take-home exam in class last week.
 - Passive: The take-home exam was distributed in class last week.

Examples: From Active to Passive

ACTIVE	PASSIVE
Someone completed the first phase of the project.	The first phase of the project was completed.
Someone used inferior materials.	Inferior materials were used.
Further investigation confirmed the report.	The report was confirmed by further investigation.

Some verbs, however, cannot be made into passive constructions:

Have	Resemble	Look like	Equal
Agree with	Mean	Contain	Comprise
Lack	Suit	Fit	Become

Common Passive and Passive-like Verbs in Academic Writing:

These common passive and passive-like verbs usually function to describe or express the location of the subject. Sentences with these passive or passive-like verbs do not contain *by* phrases.

to be composed of	to be called	to be known for	to be regarded as
to be considered as	to be founded	to be interested in	to be involved in
to be exposed to	to be concerned about/with	to be located near/in/at	to be supposed to

F U N C T I O N

1. State Generalizations

Academic writing often discusses general facts and principles instead of the actions of specific people.

- Active: *Designers designed automobile air bags to inflate in a crash.*
- Passive: *Automobile air bags are designed to inflate in a crash.*

2. Talk about an event or action in which the subject is unknown

- *The unidentified victim was apparently struck during the early morning hours.*

3. The subject is unimportant or obvious, that is when the actor in the situation is not important

- *The aurora borealis can be observed in the early morning hours.*

4. When it is more important to draw attention to the person or thing acted upon.

- Active: *Someone transfers the data to a computer and plots the data on a graph.*
- Passive: *The data is transferred to a computer and plotted on a graph.*

5. To avoid responsibility or blame

- Passive: *Cigarette ads were designed to appeal especially to children.* (places burden on the ads)
- Active: *We designed cigarette ads to appeal especially to children.* ('we' accepts responsibility)

6. Avoiding extra-long subjects

- *This report is distributed by the Multinational Investment Guarantee Agency.*

7. To increase coherence in written English/To shift emphasis

Writers can create a connection by ending one sentence with a noun phrase and beginning the next with the same noun phrase or synonym.

- *The vacuum tubes in radios were replaced by transistors. Transistors are more efficient.*

8. To avoid gendered pronouns

- Active: *Each child gave his or her mother a rose.*
- Passive: *Each mother was given a rose by her child.*

I N P R A C T I C E

When revising, make sure the passive voice is being used for one of the functions above AND that the passive construction is the best way to express this idea in the correct form (*be* + past participle). When used appropriately, balancing the active and passive voices creates sentence variety, clarity, and correct tone.