

Active vs. Passive Voice

It is important to know the difference between active and passive voice and when to use them. Both active and passive voice can be valid and correct, but, used inappropriately, they can lead to confusing and needlessly complex sentences.

In the **active voice**, the subject of the sentence is the actor—the main verb describes what the “doer” is doing. This is an efficient way to construct simple, direct sentences that communicate an action.

Form:

.....subject + verb + object

Subject is the real doer of the action

- She threw the ball. (She – subject, threw-action in past tense, the ball- object)
- We wrote the lab report.

In the **passive voice**, the subject of the sentence is the thing acted upon. It directs the reader’s attention to the thing that experienced the action (the verb) of the sentence.

Form:

.....subject(object of the active voice)+ to be in the same tense as the tense used in active voice) + the past participle of the main verb + (by the subject of the active voice)

Subject is not the real doer of the action

- The ball was thrown. (The ball- subject(**the object in active voice**); was(to be **in the past tense**))
- The lab report was written.

NOTE: The passive voice typically uses some form of the verb “to be” (is, was, were, had been, etc.).

There are perfectly sound reasons to use both “voices” in writing. There are cases when the actor (the “who”) is unknown, unimportant, or implied:

- The city was founded in 1806. (By whom? *A lot of people. That’s not the point here—I’m focusing on the date.*)
 - My laptop was stolen! (By whom? *I don’t know, obviously!*)

There are also times when you might consciously choose to minimize the role of the actor:

- The deadline was missed. (*I’d rather not say who’s to blame...*)
 - Part of the track was broken. (...due to circumstances out of our control, but that isn’t important to my reader.)

However, ineffective use of the passive voice can cause issues with concision and clarity in large part because it relies on “to be” instead of more precise action words—why say “The report was written by me” when you can say “I wrote the report”?

In scientific or technical writing, there is a common (but not universal) perception that personal pronouns can undermine the objectivity of the writer or distract from

important information. This is one of the main reasons passive voice appears so frequently in scientific or technical writing—the focus is shifted away from the person doing the action.