

The Passive Voice vs. The Active Voice

If you find that your writing is a little “awkward”, it could partly be because you are using the passive voice instead of the active voice, which is very common. The active voice is often better to use for clarity because the passive voice sometimes results in vagueness and unnecessarily complicated sentences. See the table below:

	Passive Voice	Active Voice
Function	Tells us what is done to a person/ thing, i.e. the subject of the sentence is being acted <i>upon</i> .	Tells us what a person/ thing does, i.e. the subject of the sentence <i>performs</i> the action on the object.
Focus	The focus is on the action or the object.	The focus is on the subject who performs the action.
Sentence Structure	Object + Verb + Subject.	Subject + Verb + Object.
Example 1	The experiment was performed by the student according to the instructions provided by the lecturer.	The student performed the experiment according to the instructions provided by the lecturer.
Example 2	It is outlined by the author how igneous rocks evolve into sedimentary rocks when they are exposed at the earth's surface.	The author outlines how igneous rocks evolve into sedimentary rocks when they are exposed at the earth's surface.
Example 3	The study, which had been conducted without reference to ethical standards, was censured and subsequently was debunked by critics.	The critics censured and subsequently debunked the study because it was conducted without reference to ethical standards.

Why is the Passive Voice Sometimes Problematic?

- It can sometimes obscure the subject of the sentence.
- It tends to produce longer and more syntactically complicated sentences.
- It requires more verbs in the sentence, which can result in a loss of clarity.
- “The passive voice weakens style because it is used, consciously and unconsciously, to evade responsibility” (H.J. Tichy, *Effective Writing for Engineers, Managers, Scientists*, 1966).

TIP: Avoid mixing the passive and the active voice in the same sentence.

Passive + Active (✗): The questionnaires were distributed to the participants, and they submitted their responses by the end of the session.

Passive (✓): The questionnaires were distributed to the participants and responses were submitted at the end of the session.

Active (✓): The participants collected the questionnaires and submitted their responses at the end of the session.

How to Avoid the Passive Voice:

If you think you are overusing the passive voice and want to switch to the active voice, you need to identify the subject of your sentence. A subject is usually a noun (i.e., a person, a place, a thing, or an idea). Here are some examples of subjects performing an action (a verb) in sentences that use the active voice:

- ✓ **Using authors/ scientists as subjects:** Johnson et al. report that groups with signs of diabetes or immunodeficiency have demonstrated much higher morbidity rates.
- ✓ **Using existing studies/ research as subjects:** The existing literature examines large-scale topographical patterns alongside disease dynamics by using a metapopulation framework.
- ✓ **Using sections of your own work as subjects:** , e.g. The results indicate that severe hypothermia did not develop as quickly as anticipated. Table 1 maps the trajectory of the development over the course of days.

Once you have done this, you can structure your sentence in a simpler pattern:

Subject + verb + object

When to Use the Passive Voice:

- ✓ To avoid the use of the first-person.
 - **Active Voice:** I discuss Hegel's philosophy of right.
 - **Passive Voice:** Hegel's philosophy of right is discussed.
- ✓ To emphasise the object or the action instead of the subject in the sentence.
 - **Active Voice:** The committee finally endorsed the research proposal.
 - **Passive Voice:** The research proposal was endorsed by the committee.
- ✓ To omit the name of the subject from the sentence intentionally.
 - **Active Voice:** Smith et al. misinterpreted the results.
 - **Passive Voice:** The results were misinterpreted.
- ✓ When the subject is unknown, unclear, or unimportant in the context of the sentence.
 - **Active Voice:** Someone attacked the victim at 9.00pm on Friday night.
 - **Passive Voice:** The victim was attacked at 9.00pm on Friday night.
- ✓ To argue against another critical stance, i.e. you can render your opponent's argument in the passive voice and render your own argument in the active voice. This can enhance the authoritative tone of your argument.
 - **Opposing Argument:** It has been claimed (Smith 2009; Taylor 2018) that technology is counterproductive in the classroom.
 - **Proposed Argument:** On the contrary, technology is highly beneficial to the learning process, if properly utilised.