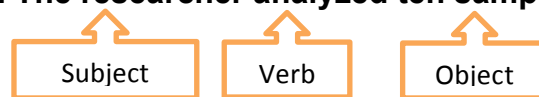


Active and Passive Voice

In spoken English, the active and passive voices are both used with little thought given to the significance of word order in the sentence. In writing at the university level, students often are required to use active voice, which is considered to be more concise and assertive. However, passive voice is the preferred configuration in some circumstances.

In active voice, the subject (the noun that performs the verb) is placed at the beginning of the sentence and is followed by its verb.

Ex. The researcher analyzed ten samples.



Notice that, with this configuration, the person who takes the action becomes the main focus of the sentence. In other words, the actor is immediately identified and therefore must take ownership of her/his action. Compare this to the passive voice:

Ex. Ten samples were analyzed by the researcher.



In this case, the object becomes the focus of the sentence and the subject is less emphasized. In addition, this configuration allows you to omit the subject entirely, and this omission can be convenient when your purpose is to avoid any mention of the actor:

Ex. The lamp in the living room was broken.



The above example carefully avoids any mention of *who* performed the action of breaking the lamp. This omission is helpful in writing in the Sciences, as it is common in that discipline to maintain a semblance of objectivity by avoiding any mention of a human actor 'interfering' in the scientific process. That being said, some Science professors prefer active voice.

Active: Dr. Krieger considered the drug to be a medical breakthrough, but after he tested the drug further, he found that it had serious side effects.

Passive: The drug was considered to be a medical breakthrough, but after further testing, it was found to have serious side effects.

In the first sentence, the active voice suggests that Dr. Krieger made an error in judgment, while in the second sentence, the passive voice delivers important information about the drug without implying anything (either positive or negative) about Dr. Krieger.

In situations where a particular action is inevitable, but the performer of that action is still unknown, passive voice should be used.

Ex. Trespassers will be prosecuted.

The active voice configuration would require us to identify the 'prosecutors' in this example, but we may not have that information when issuing the warning. However, in most cases in academic writing, we do want to require the actors in our sentences to take ownership over their actions. Compare:

Active: **In this paper, I will argue that our civil liberties are not threatened by the Government's new law.**

Passive: **In this paper, it will be argued that our civil liberties are not threatened by the Government's new law.**

The active voice example forces you, the writer, to take responsibility for your own views and ideas, whereas the passive voice example does not clearly identify who is making the argument, and so the writer could conceivably deny that the views expressed in the paper are shared by him or her.

Practice Exercise

Rewrite the following passive voice examples into active voice:

- 1) It is expected by Management that the rules will be followed by the staff.
- 2) The building has been left by Elvis.
- 3) The sentiments of the speaker were applauded.
- 4) It was proven by Atticus that the crime was not committed by the accused.
- 5) The site will be excavated as soon as permission is granted by the municipality.

Answers

- 1) Management expects the staff to follow the rules.
- 2) Elvis has left the building.
- 3) The audience applauded the speaker's sentiments.
- 4) Atticus proved that the accused did not commit the crime.
- 5) The archeological team will excavate the site as soon as the municipality grants permission.