



Active and Passive Voice

Recognizing Active and Passive Voice

A sentence uses the active voice when:

- The subject of the sentence is the doer: "Jane tossed the ball to Ron." (Who tossed the ball? Jane did.)
- The attribute of the subject is directly stated: "This book is excellent." (What is excellent? The book.)

A sentence uses the passive voice when:

- The "doer" of the action is not mentioned: "The ball was tossed to Ron." (Who tossed the ball?)
- The subject of the sentence is acted upon: "The ball was tossed." (The subject is "the ball," but something is being done to the ball rather than the ball doing something.)
- The "doer" of the action is mentioned but is not the focus of the sentence: "The ball was tossed to Ron by Jane." (Jane threw the ball, but as the sentence is written, the ball is the subject of the sentence, not Jane.)

How and when to use Active and Passive Voice

The active voice is considered strong and direct, whereas the passive voice is considered indirect. Students trying to strengthen and clarify their style should avoid overuse of the passive voice.

Passive voice phrases commonly overused in academic papers include:

- In thesis statements: "X can be seen/understood as y."
- In conclusions: "It has been demonstrated/shown that _____."

When passive voice is appropriate:

- When you want to emphasize what is being done to something instead of the person doing it. ("The house was destroyed in the fire." This puts the emphasis on the house rather than on the fire.)

- When the doer is not of interest. (“The thief was caught.” Here the emphasis is on the thief, not the person or persons who caught him, which is either not important or implied. Here, for instance, the reader can induce that police caught the thief.)
- In order to deflect responsibility or conceal information. (This is appropriate when you need to conceal a piece of information or tell a “half-truth”: “Your car was totaled yesterday” vs. “I wrecked your car.”)

When active voice is more appropriate:

- For most claims or interpretative statements in academic prose:
 - Passive: “History was transformed by this crucial event.”
 - Active (better): “This event transformed history.”
 - Passive: “It will be demonstrated that Emily Dickinson was infatuated with death.”
 - Active (better): “I will argue that Emily Dickinson was infatuated with death.”
- For recounting events in a straightforward tone:
 - Passive: “A poisonous mushroom was eaten by the dog, which killed the dog.”
 - Active (better): “The dog ate a poisonous mushroom and died.”