

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE



ACTIVE VOICE

Most of the writing we do at university is in what we call the **active voice**. The active voice helps the reader understand clearly who or what does the action by placing it first in the sentence. The doer of the action is known as the 'subject', and this is almost always followed immediately by the action or being word (verb).



e.g. The children ate the chocolate.

In this sentence '*The children*' are the subject or doers of the action '*ate*' (verb). In this instance '*the chocolate*' is what we call the 'object' of the sentence – the receiver of the action. Similarly, in the following sentence, '*The authors of the report*' is the subject and '*analysed*' is the verb describing what the report did. The object of the sentence is "*three alternative approaches*".

e.g. The authors of the report analysed three alternative approaches.

PASSIVE VOICE

Occasionally it is useful to change the focus of the sentence, so that the object (receiver of the action) comes first. One way to achieve this is to use the **passive voice**. When we use the passive voice, we can also sometimes choose to avoid saying who did the action (the 'agent').

For example:

The chocolate was eaten (by the children).

Three alternative approaches were analysed (by the authors of the report).

HOW TO FORM THE PASSIVE

To change an active sentence into a passive, move the object (receiver of the action) to the beginning of the sentence, add the appropriate form of the verb 'to be' and change the existing verb into the past participle.



For example:

The chocolate	was	eaten	by	the children
Object (now as subject)	to be	past participle	by	agent

Please note:

- Only verbs which have an object can be made into the passive. These are called 'transitive' verbs. Intransitive verbs do not have an object.

e.g. The student sneezed. = No passive form

- Tense is formed in the *to be* verb.

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TENSE	Active	Passive
Present simple	The children eat the chocolate	The chocolate is eaten (by the children)
Present continuous	The children are eating the chocolate	The chocolate is being eaten (by the children)
Present Perfect	The children have eaten the chocolate	The chocolate has been eaten (by the children)
Past simple	The children ate the chocolate	The chocolate was eaten (by the children)
Past continuous	The children were eating the chocolate	The chocolate was being eaten (by the children)
Past perfect	The children had eaten the chocolate	The chocolate had been eaten (by the children)
Future simple	The children will eat the chocolate	The chocolate will be eaten (by the children)
Future continuous	The children will be eating the chocolate	The chocolate will be being eaten (by the children)
Future perfect	The children will have eaten the chocolate	The chocolate will have been eaten (by the children)
Present conditional	The children would eat the chocolate	The chocolate would be eaten (by the children)
Past conditional	The children would have eaten the chocolate	The chocolate would have been eaten (by the children)
Use with modals	The children should/could/must eat the chocolate	The chocolate should/could/must be eaten (by the children)

WHEN TO USE THE PASSIVE VOICE

Most academic writing should be in the active voice. However, there are times when it is useful to use the passive:

- When you want to emphasise the thing or person acted on
e.g. The art collection containing over 2000 works was lost in the fire.
- When the performer of the action is unknown or not important
e.g. Compulsory voting was introduced in Australia in 1911.
- When it is obvious who did the action
e.g. The thief was sentenced to 3 years in prison.
- In scientific writing to objectively describe a process or experiment
e.g. Research participants were asked to describe what they saw.
- When you are talking about a general truth
e.g. Laws are made to make society run smoothly.
- When you deliberately want to be vague about who was responsible for the action
e.g. Errors were made in the calculation of the budget.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE



WHEN TO AVOID THE PASSIVE VOICE

While it can be appropriate and useful to use the passive, many academic disciplines prefer that you use the active voice and avoid the passive if possible. Check with your own discipline to be sure what is expected of you. There are several possible reasons for this.

1. Use of the active voice tends to make your writing clearer, stronger and more direct.
2. Passives can be used to mask gaps in your knowledge, by avoiding crediting a person or thing with an action. As a result, writing can be vague, and arguments can be imprecise or weak.

e.g. It is claimed that 73% students prefer to study with music on in the background.
(Who claimed this? Which study?)

3. Overuse of the passive can make a passage 'wordy' and hard to read.

REFERENCES & USEFUL RESOURCES

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