

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

When a sentence is written in the **active voice**, the subject performs the action indicated by the verb. In a sentence written in the **passive voice**, the subject receives the action indicated by the verb.

Both active and passive voice can be useful depending on the context in which one is writing. Passive voice is often used in scientific writing, allowing scientists and researchers to describe their work from an objective distance, while active voice is preferred in most non-scientific contexts for its clarity and directness.

Passive voice can be useful when you want to highlight the action that has taken place rather than the actor who caused the action (e.g., The legislation was approved by the Senate yesterday), when you want to be discreet by not naming the actor (e.g., This data has been widely misunderstood), or when the actor is unknown (e.g., A man was injured in an altercation last night).

However, passive voice also tends to use more words to express action, which can result in vague, wordy, or unclear sentences. Many have also criticized the use of passive voice, particularly by news media outlets, to avoid naming those responsible for an action (e.g., Errors in judgment have been made in this case) or to place the responsibility on the recipient of the action rather than the actor (e.g., Early this morning, a woman was attacked while walking alone).

Therefore, most non-scientific university disciplines consider active voice to be more concise and straightforward. It is usually best practice to state your point clearly and directly to ensure that readers can comprehend the meaning of your sentence quickly and easily, resulting in stronger, more impactful writing.

Consider the following examples of active vs. passive sentences. Which ones do you find easiest to understand?

Active: Alice won the race.

Passive: The race was won by Alice.

Active: Late last night, a stranger followed Inez home.

Passive: Late last night, Inez was followed home by a stranger.

Active: Aziza enjoys taking long walks on the beach.

Passive: Long walks on the beach are enjoyed by Aziza.

Active: MacDonald proposes that Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of the first proto-feminist writers.

Passive: The idea that Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of the first proto-feminist writers is proposed by MacDonald.