



Graduate Online Writing Studio

Active vs. Passive Voice

Over the course of your collegiate experience, you may have heard your instructors advise against using the passive voice in your work. Active and passive voice emphasize the subject performing the action in the sentence (active voice) or the object affected by the action of the sentence (passive voice). The Seventh Edition of the APA Manual (2020) explains active and passive voice in the following way:

- In the **active voice**, the writer presents the subject of a sentence first, followed by the verb and then the object of the verb (e.g., Students completed surveys).
- In the **passive voice**, the writer presents the object of the verb first, followed by the verb (usually a form of “to be” + past participle + the word “by”), and then the subject last (e.g., Surveys were completed by students). In this example, the use of the linking verb “were” and the absence of a subject make the sentence passive.

Using the passive voice can cause problems with clarity and understanding for the reader. For instance, sometimes passive constructions omit the subject, leading the reader to wonder who or what performed the action in the sentence. When writers omit the subject in the passive voice, their writing can also come off as evasive or dishonest, especially in professional communication. In any situation, you can strengthen your writing by using the active voice to create direct, clear, and concise sentences.

Testing for Passive Voice

You can use the zombie test to determine if you employed the active or passive voice. If you can add the phrase “by zombies” to the end of the sentence and it makes sense, then your sentence likely lacks an active subject and is in the passive voice.

Zombie Test Examples

Passive Voice: The college students’ massive brains were eaten (by zombies).

Active Voice: The zombies ate the college students’ massive brains.

Passive Voice: The exam was rescheduled (by zombies).

Active Voice: The instructor rescheduled the exam.

Revising for Active Voice

To make a passive sentence active, bring the subject to the forefront of the sentence and place the object after the verb (e.g., changing “The squirrel was chased by **the dog**.” to “**The dog** chased the squirrel.”). You may also need to revise the verb to make it agree with the new active subject by removing any helping verbs attached

(e.g., changing “The Writing Studio **was utilized** by the students.” to “The students **utilized** the Writing Studio.”).

Passive to Active Voice Revision Examples

Passive Voice: The medication was taken orally by the patients.

Active Voice: The patients took the medication orally.

Passive Voice: The participants were chosen based on the selection criteria.

Active Voice: The researchers chose participants based on the selection criteria.

Passive Voice: All staff were required to attend sensitivity training following the discrimination incident.

Active Voice: The company required all staff to attend sensitivity training following the discrimination incident.

Passive Voice: The bill was passed by Congress despite their contentious debate over its contents.

Active Voice: Congress passed the bill despite their contentious debate over its contents.

Passive Voice: The audience should always be considered.

Active Voice: Writers should always consider their audience.

Passive Voice: An error has occurred with your account, but every attempt was made to remedy it.

Active Voice: We made an error with your account, but we have made every attempt to remedy it.

Although these revisions may seem relatively minor, they can improve your writing in a dramatic way. By using active sentence constructions whenever possible, you can enhance the clarity and precision of your writing while removing any wordiness or vagueness that may confuse your reader.

