

quicktips

ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE VOICE

Problem

Beginning or inattentive writers tend to overuse passive voice, which can weaken their prose, lead to the omission of important information, and make them appear unsure of their ideas. When instructors draw attention to the problem, some students overcompensate, eliminating all passive voice from their writing.

Although many academic writers often favor active voice because it is direct and concise, both voices are useful and necessary. That is why the grammar check on word processing programs highlights all passive constructions—it gives writers a chance to consider whether each choice is appropriate according to the purpose of the sentence.

Solutions

UNDERSTAND HOW BOTH ACTIVE AND PASSIVE SENTENCES ARE STRUCTURED.

- Active Voice: The subject of the sentence is the one doing the action.

The researchers **compared** the behavior of two groups of children.

The clerk **was helping** the customer.

Students **need** good study skills to succeed in college.

You **should tell** him.

- Passive Voice: The subject of the sentence is now being acted upon. The actor moves to the end of the sentence with *by* or drops off altogether if it is unimportant or unknown. The verb must include a form of *be*, followed by a past participle (normally an *-ed* ending).

The behavior of two groups of children **was compared** (by the researchers).

The customer **was being helped** (by the clerk).

Good study skills **are needed** to succeed in college.

He **should be told**.

- Only verbs that are followed by an object can be used in the passive. It is not possible to use verbs such as *come*, *exist*, *happen*, *seem*, and *sleep* (intransitive verbs) in the passive.

Incorrect: Something was happened.

Correct: Something happened.

KNOW WHEN ACTIVE VOICE IS APPROPRIATE OR PREFERRED. All of the examples below are choices based on style and rhetorical context, not strict grammar rules.

- To focus readers' attention on the actor, not what is being acted upon.

Active: Captain Ahab pursues the whale relentlessly.

Passive: The whale is pursued relentlessly. (Or, The whale is pursued relentlessly by Captain Ahab.)

In the above example, the active voice would be preferred if the writer wanted to focus readers' attention on Captain Ahab. The passive voice would be preferred if the writer wanted to focus readers' attention on the whale, or on the fact that it is pursued relentlessly.

- When it is important that readers know exactly who did (or said) what to whom.

Active: When U.S. troops invaded Iraq, they inadvertently killed many civilians.

Passive: When Iraq was invaded, many civilians were killed inadvertently.

In the above example, the active voice would be appropriate if the writer wanted to name or emphasize the actors (U.S troops), not only their actions. The passive voice would be appropriate if the writer did not think it was important for readers to know who did the actions in the sentence.

KNOW WHEN PASSIVE VOICE IS APPROPRIATE OR PREFERRED. All of the examples below are choices based on style and rhetorical context, not strict grammar rules.

- To focus attention on the process or materials, rather than on the actor, as in scientific or technical writing.

Next, salicylic acid was added to the test tube.

- To focus attention on the object, rather than the actor.

Paper, the main writing material today, was invented by the Chinese.

This is appropriate when the focus is on the history of paper, not on Chinese innovations. Choosing passive voice allows the writer to use "paper" as the subject of the sentence.

The new highway will be completed sometime next month.

This is appropriate when the focus is on the highway project, not on the workers completing it.

- To connect ideas in different clauses or sentences more clearly.

When interviewing for a job, avoid making grammatical errors. They are often used by employers to weed out job applicants.

In the beginning of the second sentence, using passive voice ("used by employers") allows the writer to refer to grammatical errors ("They") right away in order to clearly connect to the end of the previous sentence.

For more grammar information:

Azar, B. S. (1989). *Understanding and using English grammar*. (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

For more usage information:

Anson, C. M., Schwegler, R. A., & Muth, M.F. (2000). *The Longman writer's companion*. New York: Longman.

Miles, R., Bertolasco, M., & Karns, W. (1991). *Prose style: A contemporary guide*. (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Williams, J. M. (2000) *Style: Ten lessons in clarity and grace*. (6th ed.). New York, NY: Longman.