

Writing and Tutorial Center

Active or Passive Voice?

Is it better to write “The contract was signed” (passive voice) or “The lawyers signed the contract” (active voice)? This may not be an easy question to answer! Typically, passive voice is implemented in reporting and in technical or scientific writing to describe methods or results. In the humanities and social sciences, overuse of the passive voice can weigh down your writing and diminish its impact. When you use the active voice, you emphasize who is doing the action. Generally by using the active voice, you can create clear and concise sentences for your academic writing. Let’s investigate:

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

The passive voice requires transitive verbs—which need a direct object to complete meaning.

Example: Entrance essays are written by potential students. [passive voice answers *who*]

Compare: Potential students write entrance essays. [active voice]
[subject][verb] [object]

Note: The object answers “what?” or “whom?” after the verb.

Common intransitive verbs (verbs that do not take a direct object) include *happen*, *appear*, *exist*, *occur*, *belong*, and *die*.

Correct: His scent lingered in the room.

Incorrect: His scent lingered it in the room. [no object]

Note: Passive voice cannot use an intransitive verb because there is no object to become the subject of the sentence.

When both active voice and passive voice are possible, you can choose which parts of a sentence you want to emphasize based on context. Compare and observe where you feel the emphasis is placed.

Frank Gehry designed the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. [active]

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao was designed by Frank Gehry. [passive]

FORMS OF THE PASSIVE

To form the passive, use the correct form = **be + the past participle of the main verb**. Also, “be” is determined by the tense or by any modal auxiliary coming before it.

The votes *were tallied* last night. [past simple]

The votes should *have been tallied* by now. [modal + perfect passive]

Less Common: Continuous tense in the passive = **be + being + past participle**.

The votes were *being tallied* last night. [passive]

They were *tallying* the votes last night. [active]

Note: The continuous tense is less common in passive voice as it can sound heavy or too formal.

USES OF THE PASSIVE

As previously mentioned, in technical or scientific writing the passive is often preferred. Use passive when the doer of the action [the agent] is unknown or unimportant.

Thirteen priceless paintings *were stolen* [by someone] from the museum.

When gold *was discovered* [by people] in California, boomtowns appeared.

Also, you may use passive voice to emphasize the action.

In the 1930s, many skyscrapers were built in New York City. [passive]

In the 1930s, architects built many skyscrapers in New York City. [active]

Use the passive in scientific writing when we are most interested in what happened, not who did the action.

The experiment *has been conducted* multiple times. [passive]

Scientists *have conducted* the experiment multiple times. [active]

Active vs. Passive

Active voice is generally stronger and more concise because it shows **who is doing what**:

The librarian analyzed the manuscript.

Passive voice shifts focus to the action or result and hides or downplays the doer:

The manuscript was analyzed.

Use the **active voice** to express yourself with clarity and to make an impact. Choose to use the **passive voice** when you want to emphasize the result or action. (Also, you may need to use the passive voice when the doer is unknown or unimportant.)