



3.3 Active voice & Passive voice

EN2106 – Communication Skills I

Level I - Semester 2

Subject/ Verb/ Object

She writes books.



SUBJECT

Who or what performs the action of the verb is the subject.



VERB

The verb is the word that expresses what that action is.



OBJECT

Whoever or whatever receives that action is the object.

ACTIVE VOICE

When we write a sentence in active voice, the ***subject*** performs the *action* stated by the ***verb***. It follows a clear subject + verb + object construct that is easy to read.

e.g. *The cat chased the rat.*

Why should I use active voice?

Active voice highlights the logical flow of the action, from the subject (or *doer*) to the object (or *receiver*) of the action. Using active voice in your writing will make your sentences clear and straightforward leaving almost no ambiguity, which are important components of academic writing.

PASSIVE VOICE

In passive voice, the subject is acted upon by the verb. It makes a less straightforward sentence compared to active voice.

e.g. *The rat was chased by the cat.*

Why should I use active voice?

The **passive voice** is **used** when we want to focus attention on the person or thing affected by the action. A passive construction occurs when you make the **object** of an **action** into the **subject** of a sentence.

How to form passive voice

The object of the active sentence should become the subject of the passive sentence.

The finite form of the verb is changed (to be + *past participle*) the subject of the active sentence should become the object of the passive sentence (or is dropped)

ACTIVE: The cat chased the rat.

PASSIVE: The rat was chased by the cat.

Past participle examples

A few regular verbs

Infinitive	Past Simple	Past Participle
to chase	chase <u>ed</u>	chase <u>ed</u>
to look	look <u>ed</u>	look <u>ed</u>
to talk	talk <u>ed</u>	talk <u>ed</u>

Past participle examples

A few irregular verbs

Infinitive	Past Simple	Past Participle
to be	was/ were	been
to come	came	come
to take	took	taken
to see	saw	seen
to hit	hit	hit

Use the Active Voice...

In speaking as well as writing, use active voice as much as possible.

Passive voice sentences often use more words, can be vague and may head towards a tangle of prepositional phrases which leads to confusion.

However, passive voice is mostly used in academic writing whereas active voice is often used in non-scientific writing.

Ultimately it is the writer who should take a wise decision as to which voice s/he should stick to.

When to use Passive voice?

The less straight forward passive voice is appropriate:

- For typical situations

Robots are used for risky action.

- To avoid direct responsibility

A mistake was made.

- When who performed the action of the verb is not known or is irrelevant

The decision was made.

- For emphasis

The yellow car was destroyed by the bus. (not the blue car)

Source: <https://onlinewritingtraining.com.au/active-passive-voice/>

Examples

Active Voice

Subject Action Object
Sally drove her car off of the road.

Subject Action Object
The dog bit Timmy on the arm.

Passive Voice

Object Action Subject
The car was driven off the road by Sally.

Object Action Subject
Timmy was bitten on the arm by the dog.

Source: <https://writingcenter.ashford.edu/active-vs-passive-voice>

Academic Writing

- Passive voice is often used in academic writing. This is because we usually do not need to focus on who is doing the action but on the receiver of the action.
- Passive voice allows writers to highlight the most important participants or events within sentences by placing them at the beginning of the sentence.

Academic Writing...

In the following sentence, the passive construction is preferable because you want readers to focus on the result of an action rather than the person doing the action.

e.g.

Active: The Public Health Inspector observed the hand washing facilities installed in public schools.

Passive: The hand washing facilities installed in public schools were observed by the Public Health inspector

The passive sentence focuses on **installing facilities** rather than on the four members of staff.

Academic Writing...

In academic writing it is often sounds somewhat unprofessional to repeatedly state the subject (doer) of the actions. Passive voice is a useful way to avoid this. Use of passive voice also contributes in avoiding informal personal pronouns.

e.g. Random interviews were conducted in order to get the views of the foreigners who visit Sigiriya.

(It is obvious that it was the author who carried out the interviews.)

THE END