



Active and Passive Voice

The *voice* you choose can determine whether your writing is vigorous or flat. Voice, in grammar, describes whether the subject of a sentence is *acting* (active voice) or *being acted upon* (passive voice). Writers have occasion to use both voices, but most writers generally choose active voice because it is clearer and more concise.

When to Use Active Voice:

The active voice eliminates uncertainty that can cloud passive-voice sentences, which may not identify the actor.

- Passive voice: The stadium's upper deck was built by a company from Fayetteville.
 - The upper deck is the subject. The upper deck is receiving the action (being built). Thus, the voice is passive. To rewrite the sentence in the active voice, make the actor the subject
- Active voice: A company from Fayetteville built the stadium addition.
 - With this sentence, no doubt exists as to who (the company) performs what actions
- Passive voice: New dormitory policies were recommended.
 - The actor is not named, so the reader cannot tell who recommended the policies. To clarify the meaning, rewrite the sentence with the actor as the subject.
- Active voice: The student council recommended new dormitory policies.
 - Naming the actor clarifies the sentence's meaning and allows one to act on the information in the sentence – if students have questions or concerns about the recommended policies, then they know who to contact

When to Use Passive Voice:

Writers sometimes have good reasons to use the passive voice. Scientists writing laboratory reports, for instance, may deliberately use the passive voice to emphasize the procedures and results, deliberately keeping themselves in the background. Other occasions may arise in which the action so overshadows the actor that the passive voice is preferred.

- The compound was heated, and the color change was observed.
 - What matters the most in this sentence is the process and the observation, not who did the steps; when the actor is less important than the results of the his/her actions or the process of his/her actions, consider using passive voice.
- The former chief executive was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.
 - In this sentence, it is not so important to say that a judge and jury did the convicting and the sentencing. The focus should be on the former executive who received those actions.