
Using the 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 good writers generally choose active voice because it is clearer and more concise.

Example 1:

- 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.

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

Example 2:

- 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.

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.

Example 3:

- The compound was heated, and the color change was observed.

Other occasions may arise in which the *action* so overshadows the *actor* that the passive voice is preferred.

Example 4:

- 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.*

In written communication, it is especially important to use active voice. When you write an adjustment letter, for instance, you want to avoid appearing as if the company is not accepting responsibility.