Passive Voice

What this handout is about...

This handout will help you understand what the passive voice is, why many professors and writing instructors frown upon it, and how you can revise your paper, using simple strategies, to achieve greater clarity. Some things here may surprise you. In any case, we hope this handout will help you to understand the passive voice and allow you to make more informed choices as you write.

Myths

So what is the passive voice? First, let's clear up what the passive voice isn't. Below, we'll list some common myths about the passive voice:

1. Use of the passive voice constitutes a grammatical error.

Use of the passive voice is not a grammatical error. It's a stylistic issue that pertains to clarity--that is, there are times when your use of the passive prevents a reader from understanding what you mean.

2. Any use of "to be" (in any form) constitutes the passive voice.

The passive voice entails more than just using a being verb. Using "to be" can weaken the impact of your writing, but it is occasionally necessary and does not constitute the passive voice by itself.

3. The passive voice always avoids the first person; if something's in first person ("I" or "we") it's also in the active voice.

On the contrary, you can very easily use the passive voice in the first person: "I was hit by the dodgeball."

4. You should never use the passive voice.

While the passive voice can weaken the clarity of your writing, there are times when the passive voice is OK and even preferable.

5. I can rely on my grammar checker to catch the passive voice.

See Myth #1. Since the passive voice isn't a grammar error, it's not always caught. Typically, grammar checkers catch only a fraction of passive voice usage.
Do any of these misunderstandings sound familiar? If so, you're not alone. So we wrote this handout. It discusses how to recognize the passive voice, when you should avoid it, and when it's OK.

**Defining the passive voice**

A passive construction occurs when you make the object of an action into the subject of a sentence. That is, the one performing the action is not the grammatical subject of the sentence. To rephrase a familiar joke:

> Why was the road crossed by the chicken?

The chicken is the actor in this sentence, but the road is the grammatical subject. The more familiar phrasing places the actor as the subject--a subject *doing* something: A chicken (actor/doer) crossing the road (object). We use active verbs to represent that "doing," whether it be crossing roads, proposing ideas, arguing arguments, or invading houses (more on that shortly). **Passive constructions are easy to spot; look for a form of "to be" (is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being) followed by a past participle.** (The past participle is a form of the verb often, but not always, ending in "-ed." Some exceptions to the "-ed" rule are words like "paid" and "driven." ) Here's a sure-fire formula for identifying the passive voice:

\[
\text{form of "to be" + past participle = passive voice}
\]

For example:

*The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath.*

*When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.*

**NOTE:** the passive voice is marked by a form of "to be" + the past participle--not a form of "have" *alone* + the past participle, as some students believe. So don't let the combination of "have" and "to be" fool you. In the next section, we discuss why you often want to avoid using the passive voice, but let's briefly look at how to change passive constructions into active ones. You can usually just switch the order, making the actor and subject one--putting the doer up front:

*The dragon scorched the metropolis with his fiery breath.*

*After suitors invaded Penelope's house, she had to think of ways to fend them off.*

To repeat, the key to identifying the passive voice is to look for both a form of "to be" *and* a past participle, which usually, but not always, ends in "-ed."
Clarity and Meaning

The primary reason why your instructors frown on the passive voice is that they often have to guess what you mean. Sometimes, the confusion is minor. Let's look again at that sentence from a student's paper on Homer's *The Odyssey*:

*When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.*

Like many passive constructions, this sentence lacks explicit reference to the actor--it doesn't tell the reader *who* or *what* invaded. The active voice clarifies:

*After suitors invaded Penelope's house, she had to think of ways to fend them off.*

Thus many instructors--the readers making sense of your writing--prefer that you use the active voice, that you specify who or what is doing the action. Compare the following two examples from an anthropology paper on a Laotian village to see if you agree.

(passage) *A new [drug] control system was set up.* (By whom?)
(active) *The Lao People's Revolutionary Party gradually set up a system of drug control laws.*

Here's another example, from the same paper, that illustrates the lack of precision that can accompany the passive voice:

*Gender training was conducted in six villages, thus affecting social relationships.*

And a few pages later:

*Plus, marketing links were being established.*

In both paragraphs, the writer never specifies the actors of those two actions (*Who* did the gender training? *Who* established marketing links?). Thus the reader has trouble appreciating the dynamics of these social interactions, which depend upon the actors conducting and establishing these things.

The following example, once again from that paper on *The Odyssey*, typifies another instance where an instructor might desire more precision and clarity:

*Although Penelope shares heroic characteristics with her husband, Odysseus, she is not considered a hero.*

*Who* does not consider her a hero? It's difficult to tell, but the rest of that paragraph suggests that the *student* does not consider Penelope a hero (the topic of the paper). The reader might also think the student refers to critics or scholars. One might argue that the meaning comes through here--the problem is merely stylistic. Yet style affects how your reader understands your argument and content. Awkward or unclear style prevents your reader from appreciating the ideas that are so clear to *you* when you write. Thus knowing how your reader might react enables
you to make more effective choices when you revise. So after you identify instances of the passive ("to be" + the past participle), you should consider if your use of the passive inhibits clear understanding of what you mean.

**Summarizing history or literary plots with the passive voice: Don't be a lazy thinker or writer!**

With the previous section in mind, you should also know that some instructors proclaim that the passive voice signals sloppy, lazy thinking--that those who use it have not thought through a process they are discussing. Imprecision follows. Consider these sentences from papers on American history:

*The working class was marginalized.*
*African Americans were discriminated against.*
*Women were not treated as equals.*

Such sentences lack the precision and connection to context and causes that mark rigorous thinking. The reader learns little about the systems, conditions, human decisions and contradictions that led each of those groups to experience their histories. And so the reader--your instructor--questions your understanding of these things. You particularly want to think twice about using passive constructions in thesis statements for these reasons. Strong theses and strong writing in general mark a writer who indicates the relationships between not only larger processes like these three above but also minor actions, such as those of Penelope's storming suitors.

In papers where you discuss an author's work--e.g., historians or literary authors--you can also strengthen your writing by not relying on the passive as a crutch to summarize plots or arguments. Instead of writing

*It is argued that...*
*or Tom and Huck are portrayed as...*
*or And then the link between X and Y is made, showing that...*

you can heighten the level of your analysis by explicitly connecting an author with these statements.

*Anderson argues that...*
*Twain portrays Tom and Huck as...*
*Ishiguro draws a link between X and Y to show that...*

Thus by avoiding passive constructions in these situations you can demonstrate a more thorough understanding of the material you discuss. You can show that you're not a lazy, sloppy thinker.
Scientific Writing

That advice goes well for papers in the humanities, you note, but what about technical or scientific papers, including lab reports? Many instructors require if not recommend the passive voice in such writing. The rationale for using the passive is that it achieves "an objective tone"--for example, by avoiding the first person. To consider scientific writing, let's break it up into two main types: lab reports and writing about a scientific topic or literature.

Lab Reports

Although more and more scientific journals accept first-person active voice (e.g., "then we sequenced the human genome"), many of your instructors want you to remove yourself from your lab report by using the passive voice (e.g., "then the human genome was sequenced"). Such advice particularly applies to the section on Methods and Materials, where a procedure "is followed." (For a fuller discussion on writing lab reports, see our handout on Writing Lab Reports.)

While you might employ the passive voice to retain objectivity, you can still use active constructions in some instances and retain your objective stance. Thus it's useful to keep in mind the sort of active verbs you might use in lab reports. Examples include: supported, indicated, suggested, corresponded, challenged, yielded, showed.

Thus instead of writing
*A number of things are indicated by these results.*

you could write
*These results indicate a number of things.*
or *Further analysis showed/suggested/yielded...*

Ultimately, you should find out your instructor's preference regarding your use of the passive in lab reports.

Writing about Scientific Topics or Literature

Other assignments relate not to your own scientific work but to that of others--such as literature reviews and research on scientific topics. Two main issues arise here: Reporting what other people have specifically done (e.g., research or experiments) or indicating general scientific knowledge (e.g., the body of knowledge coming out of others' research). Often the two go together. In both instances, you can easily use active constructions even though you might be tempted by the passive--especially if you're used to writing your own lab reports in the passive.

You decide: Which of these two examples represents clearer style?

*Heart disease is considered the leading cause of death in the United States.* (passive)
or *Research points to heart disease as the leading cause of death in the United States.*
Alternatively, you could write this sentence with human actors:

*Researchers have concluded that heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States.*

The last two sentences illustrate a relationship that the first one lacks. The first example does not illustrate the "who" or "what" that leads us to accept this conclusion about heart disease.

Here's one last example from a report that describes angioplasty. Which sounds better?

*The balloon is positioned in an area of blockage and is inflated.*

or

*The surgeon positions the balloon in an area of blockage and inflates it.*

The point is that you can improve your scientific writing by relying less on the passive. The advice for papers on history or literature equally applies to papers in more "scientific" courses. Just as for writing in the humanities, use of the passive may convey to your reader a sense of uncertainty and imprecision regarding your writing and thinking. The key is to know when your instructor wants you to use the passive voice. For a more general discussion of writing in the sciences, see our handout.

"Swindles and Perversions"

Before we discuss a few instances when one might actually prefer the passive, we should mention one of the more political uses of the passive: to hide blame or obscure responsibility. You wouldn't do this, but you can learn how to become a critic of those who exhibit what George Orwell included among the "swindles and perversions" of writing--vaguely couching one's culpability in the passive voice. For example:

*Mistakes were made.*

*The Exxon Company accepts that a few gallons might have been spilled.*

By becoming critically aware of how others use language to shape clarity and meaning you can learn how better to revise your own work. Keep Orwell's swindles and perversions in mind as you read other writers, since some people use the passive to avoid responsibility when they know who's responsible for the action.

So when is it OK to use the passive?

Sometimes it's better to use the passive. Indeed, many style "gurus" would argue that good style depends on variety; thus why shouldn't that apply to the active and passive voices? We agree--but note that variety itself is not the issue. You should be deliberate when choosing between the active and passive. We highlight a few instances when the passive voice is quite useful:

1. To emphasize an object.

*X number of votes are required to pass the bill.*
2. To de-emphasize an unknown subject/actor.

Over 120 different contaminants have been dumped into the river.

If you don't know who the actor is, then the passive makes more sense. But remember, if you do know the actor, and if the clarity and meaning of your writing would benefit from indicating him/her/it/them, then use an active construction. Yet consider the third case.

3. If your readers don't need to know who's responsible for the action.

Here's where your choice can be difficult; some instances are less clear than others. Try to put yourself in your reader's position to anticipate how they will react to the way you have phrased your thoughts.

Summary of Strategies

Identify

- Look for the passive voice: "to be" + a past participle (usually, but not always, ending in "-ed")
- If you don't see both components, move on.

Evaluate

- Is the doer/actor indicated? Should you indicate him/her/it?
- Does it really matter who's responsible for the action?
- Would your reader ask you to clarify a sentence because of an issue related to your use of the passive?
- Do you use a passive construction in your thesis statement?
- Do you use the passive as a crutch in summarizing a plot or history, in describing something?
- Do you want to emphasize the object?

Revise

- Switch the sentence around to make the subject and actor one: Put the doer in front of the verb.
Towards active thinking and writing

We encourage you to keep these tips in mind as you revise. While you may be able to employ this advice as you write your first draft, that's not necessarily always possible. As for most writing, clarity comes when you revise, not on your first try. Don't stress about the passive if that stress inhibits you in getting your ideas down. But do look for it when you revise. Actively make choices about its proper place in your writing. Prioritize your use of the passive when you revise: Which instances hide actors or otherwise prevent your reader from understanding the relationships you discuss? There is nothing grammatically or otherwise "wrong" about using the passive voice. The key is to recognize when you should, when you shouldn't, and when your instructor just doesn't want you to. These choices are yours. We hope this handout helps you to make them.

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For further reading on the passive voice and how to strengthen your verbs


Trimble, John R. *Writing with Style*. Pages 55-58.


University of North Carolina Writing Center on the Web
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html