

voice

Just as a photographer selects different lenses to achieve dramatic effects, you can use the active and passive voices to make your writing dynamic and engaging. This handout will help you use both voices with confidence.

Voice

Voice describes the relationship of the subject to the verb. There are two voices in English: the **active** and the **passive**. The difference is one of emphasis—do you want to emphasize that the subject is *performing* an action (active voice) or *receiving* an action (passive voice)?

Active Voice

In the active voice, the grammatical subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb. Most writing teachers emphasize the active voice because it is direct, clear, and concise. When possible, you should favor the active voice.

Example: The boy kicked the ball.

Note: The subject of the sentence is “boy.” The boy is performing the action, “kicked.”

Example: Researchers discovered a link between the chemical and cancer.

Note: The subject of the sentence is “researchers.” The researchers are performing the action, “discovered.”

Passive Voice

In the passive voice, the grammatical subject receives the action of the verb. You construct the passive voice using a form of the verb “be” and a past participle. If you are unsure of a verb’s past participle, consult a dictionary.

Example: The ball was kicked by the boy.

Example: The ball has been kicked by the boy.

Example: The ball is going to be kicked by the boy.

Note: In the above sentences, “ball” is the subject. The ball is receiving the action, “kicked.”

Passive Voice in Various Tenses

Verbs can be passive in any tense. The chart below will help you identify these different passive constructions.

Passive Voice and Verb Tense		
Present Tenses	Simple Present	The water <u>is added</u> .
	Simple Present Progressive	The water <u>is being added</u> right now.
	Present Perfect	The water <u>has been added</u> already.
	Present Perfect Progressive	The water <u>has been being added</u> for five minutes.
Past Tenses	Simple Past	The water <u>was added</u> yesterday.
	Simple Past Progressive	The water <u>was being added</u> when the beaker exploded.
	Past Perfect	The water <u>had been added</u> by that time.
	Past Perfect Progressive	The water <u>had been being added</u> for five minutes when the pump failed.
Future Tenses	Simple Future	The water <u>will be added</u> tomorrow.
	Simple Future Progressive	The water <u>will be being added</u> at 5:00 p.m.
	Future Perfect	The water <u>will have been added</u> by tomorrow.
	Future Perfect Progressive	The water <u>will have been being added</u> for five minutes when he gets here.

Note: For more information on the various verb tenses, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Passive Voice in Other Verb Forms

In situations where you would normally use the **plain form** (e.g., an infinitival), form the passive voice using the plain form of “be” and a past participle.

Active Infinitival (To): You need to heat the water to 100 degrees before being added to the mixture.

Passive Infinitival (To): The water needs to be heated to 100 degrees before being added to the mixture.

Active Infinitival (Bare): You must heat the water to 100 degrees before being added to the mixture.

Passive Infinitival (Bare): The water must be heated to 100 degrees before being added to the mixture.

Note: For more information on the various verbs forms, please see our “Verbs” [handout](#).

Using the Passive Voice Effectively

You may have heard instructors discourage using the passive voice. They do this because many of their students use the passive voice uncritically. Be sure you have a reason for using it. Use the passive voice when you want to emphasize that something is receiving an action or when the actor is not important.

Example: The water was heated to 100 degrees before being added to the mixture.

Note: This sentence focuses on the water and what was done to it. This would be appropriate in a “Methods” section, where the identity of the agents isn’t necessary.

While the passive voice appears in some scientific writing, keep in mind that the APA’s *Publication Manual* encourages use of the active voice. Likewise, editors of journals in most scientific fields prefer the

active voice, even when this necessitates personal pronouns such as “I” and “we.” If you are unsure of the preferences of a particular journal, consult its guidelines.

Example: We observed the patient in order to determine the effectiveness of the drug.

Pitfalls of Passive Voice

Evading Responsibility

Though the identity of the actor isn’t always necessary information in a sentence, some writers intentionally use the passive voice to avoid taking responsibility for actions.

Example: Mistakes were made.

Note: The author doesn’t tell us who made the mistakes, only that they were made. This is very different than saying, “I made a mistake.”

Dangling Modifiers

Usually modifiers precede the word they modify, but in the case of dangling modifiers, the word being modified is missing from the sentence. Be careful to avoid dangling modifiers when using the passive voice.

Example: In order to accommodate vegetarians, the dish was prepared without meat.

Note: It sounds as though the dish wants to accommodate vegetarians, which is nonsense. The missing element of the sentence is the identity of the person preparing the dish: the host.

Example (Corrected): In order to accommodate vegetarians, the host prepared the dish without meat.

Avoiding Mixed Sentences

Whether you choose to write a sentence in the active or passive voice, make sure to keep the voice consistent. Shifting voices unnecessarily can create confusion or make sentences awkward.

Example: He tried to save his spare change for a rainy day, but it was spent by the end of the week.

Note: The first part of the sentence is active, and the second is passive.

Example (Corrected): He tried to save his spare change for a rainy day, but he spent it by the end of the week.

Note: Both parts of the sentence are now in active voice.

Revising Passive Sentences

When revising passive sentences, look for the agent performing the action and make that the subject of the sentence.

Passive: A study was conducted by Dowler (2004) in order to determine the role of..

Note: The agent is “Dowler.”

Active: Dowler (2004) conducted a study to determine the role of..

References

- American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Azar, B. S., & Hagen, S. A. (2009). *Understanding and using English grammar*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Longman.