

Active and Passive Voice

Overuse of the passive voice is a common issue across all forms of writing.

Definitions

Active Voice: Sentences using the active voice are written in a way where the subject performs the action of the verb.

Passive Voice: In sentences using the passive voice, the subject is acted on by the verb. Sometimes this is described as the subject receiving the action of the verb.

Examples

Active Voice: "Jon transmitted the manuscript."

→ "Jon" is the subject of this sentence, and "transmitted" is the verb.

Passive Voice: "The manuscript was transmitted by Jon."

→ This sentence conveys the same information as the first example, but it's written in the passive voice where the subject is receiving the action of the verb.

Active Voice: "Jane ate the ice cream."

Passive Voice: "The ice cream was eaten by Jane."

Why is the active voice often preferable?

Simply put, active sentences are often less wordy, less awkward, and more exciting than their passive counterparts.

When is using the passive voice recommended?

Using the passive voice is not an incorrect form of writing. The issue is that the passive voice is often used unnecessarily in situations where it's preferable to use the active voice.

The passive voice is often preferable when the subject is unknown, obvious, or unimportant, or when including the subject detracts from the focus of the sentence.

Example

Consider the sentence "Escargot is considered a delicacy." Let's say the writer of this sentence intended to convey that escargot's status as a delicacy is an agreed upon general thought (as opposed to being a thought held by a specific individual or small group).

It's possible to make this sentence active. It could be changed to something like "People generally consider escargot a delicacy." However, there's a strong argument for the passive voice version of the sentence being preferable:

- The subject of the sentence is well understood without making it explicit
- The subject of the sentence isn't important in this case
- Including the subject detracts from the main focus of this sentence: escargot

In the end, determining whether to use an active sentence or a passive sentence requires a subjective decision: what seems like the best option for the specific situation?

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What about research proposal writing specifically?

The passive voice is recommended in scientific writing more than most other forms of writing. This has to do with maintaining an appearance of subjectivity when discussing conclusions. For example, it's common to see sentences like "The vitamin seems to improve circulation in elderly men." This is in contrast to a sentence that includes a personal pronoun: "We believe the vitamin improves circulation in elderly men" (to further complicate the matter, this specific sentence could be written in a way that's both active and avoids subjectivity: "The data suggests that the vitamin improves circulation in elderly men.").

However, in research proposals, the content often describes what the research team plans to do - not what the research team believes. In these cases, it's often preferable to use the active voice: "We will . . .".

