

Passive and Active Voice

What does it mean when your instructors say your paper should be written in active voice?

The **active voice** gives the noun of the sentence the most prominence. It is the type of sentence that you are most accustomed to writing.

The **passive voice** gives more prominence to the verb or action of the sentence.

Active: The woman's sewing circle sent the flowers.

Passive: The flowers were sent by the woman's sewing circle.

Active: Many factors influenced his decision to become a teacher.

Passive: His decision to become a teacher was influenced by many factors.

What makes active voice so desirable?

Your instructors may think your writing is dull, awkward, wordy, rambling, and/or unclear if not in active voice. Rewording your sentence in the active voice may completely, or at least partially, solve some of these problems.

TIP: To change a sentence from passive to active, find who or what is the main actor in the sentence and use that as the subject (at the start) of the sentence. When that is done, using the verb to complete the sentence will give you an active sentence.

There are many times when it is acceptable to use the passive voice. When the *action* of the sentence is more important than the one performing it, passive voice can be used. When the identity of the actor is unknown, passive voice is acceptable.

How do I recognize passive and active voices?

In the **passive voice** the word "**by**" is often used. This use of "by" seems to force what should be the actor or the subject into a less conspicuous place within the sentence – not in the beginning of the sentence where it would be very prominent and active.

Sometimes, the word "by" is not present. Then you have to ask yourself, "Who is doing the action in this sentence and should he/she/it be placed at the beginning of the sentence?" When looking at the following examples, see if you can recognize the active and passive voices.

Passive: Her work on grammar was determined **by** the classroom assignment.

Active: The classroom assignment determined her work on grammar.

Passive: Policies have been canceled after the customer became ill.

Active: The insurance company canceled the policies after the customer became ill.

TIP: While it is ultimately your choice when and how to use the active and passive voices, it is important to know that there is one solid rule. You should **never** mix active and passive voices in one sentence.