Active and Passive Voice

The active and passive voices have appropriate uses and settings, and using them appropriately will make your writing more effective.

The **active voice** is used in concise, non-scientific writing, like newspapers or in the humanities. Active voice helps to emphasize WHO did the action, rather than what the action was.

The **passive voice** is often used in scientific writing because it emphasizes WHAT was done, not who did it. It is also used to de-emphasize the “who”, especially when the “who” is unclear or unimportant.

**Emphasize the ACTOR or OBJECT**

The **active voice** assigns more responsibility to the **actor**. The **passive voice** will shift the focus **away from the actor** if he/she does not want to be responsible or if it is not needed.

**Key Elements:**
- **Actor**: the “who” of the sentence
- **Verb**: the “action” of the sentence
- **Object**: the “what” of the sentence

**Examples:**

*Active*: More than half of the athletes **passed** their **challenging classes**.

*Passive*: The challenging classes **were passed** by more than **half of the athletes**.

*Active*: BP **spilled** 210 million gallons of oil in 2010.

*Passive*: 210 million gallons of oil **were spilled** in 2010.

*Active*: Dr. Jones **delivered** baby Emily today.

*Passive*: Baby Emily **was delivered** today.

**Keep it CONCISE**

The **active** voice generally makes a sentence shorter and **to the point**. The **passive** voice will make a sentence longer and wordier.

**Examples:**

*Active*: The dog **bit** me.

*Passive*: I **was bitten** by the dog.

*Active*: The student **uses** many unnecessary words.

*Passive*: A lot of unnecessary words **have been used** by the student.
Additional Resources


