



Active vs. Passive Voice: When to Use Each One

You have probably heard about active and passive voice, and you may have been told never to use the passive voice, but we're here to tell you that both can work in different ways. Active voice is usually the appropriate option, but the passive voice has its place as well.

Active Voice

Sentences with active voice have an overt subject and verb, which means readers get to see "what or who" is doing "what." In the following example, we've bolded the subject and underlined the verb.

Kids can find sea shells in the cave near the beach's eastern side.

In this case, we know who (i.e., kids) is performing what action. It's easy to picture what's happening.

Since the active voice helps to clarify ideas, it's best to use it throughout your writing. You'll sound more certain of your ideas, too, and readers will find your writing easier to follow.

Passive Voice

Sentences in passive voice can fall under two categories. We either don't see a subject, or see it straggling behind the verb. For the first type, let's look at the following example:

Soccer was played all day at the park, attracting spectators from across town.

In this case, the sentence is missing an essential portion of the statement, so it leaves us with only a partial image of the action. We don't know who played the game; it could be a semi-professional league, children, recreational teams, etc.

If you encounter this in your writing, ask yourself "specifically who or what is performing the action?" so you can specify that for your readers. For this example, if local college students were performing the action, we can modify the sentence to:



Local college students played soccer all day at the park, attracting spectators from across town.

Passive voice also happens when the agent is pushed to later in the sentence, after the verb. Such an example would read:

Soccer was played all day at the park by local college students, attracting spectators from across town.

To avoid clutter and enact clarity, you can change this sentence in the same way we revised the first one.

Since we sometimes unintentionally use passive voice, we may skim over it while editing our papers. To search for passive voice, look for a “to be” verb followed by a past participle (i.e., verb forms ending in -ed, -d, -t, -en, or -n), like “was played” in the example above.

Certain Cases for Passive over Active Voice

- 1) You can purposefully ignore active voice to make the sentence’s object stand out more, so the subject won’t eclipse a more essential part of the sentence.

The cartoon was intended for kids, but adults seem to enjoy it more because of its serious themes.

We could include a subject like “producers” to show who had the intention, but that may not be necessary and could distract readers from the more significant aspects—the cartoon and its differing influences on kids and adults.

- 2) You can, for emphasis, state the subject at the end of the sentence. This can serve two purposes: the reader anticipates the subject or the subject can linger in the readers’ minds after they finish reading:

Their minds can only be settled by the refreshing scent of mint leaves.

By ending with “mint leaves,” a colorful image remains in our minds. Ending with “minds” and starting with “...mint leaves” for the active voice, on the other hand, may not draw our minds to the subject as easily.

