
ACTIVE & PASSIVE VOICE

Active and passive voice are two separate styles of writing. While there are specific reasons to choose either form, scientific academia usually prefers passive voice and the humanities generally prefer active.

Active Voice:

The basic structure for an active sentence is a subject performing a verb on an object. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the verb, or does the acting:

- The committee made the decision.

Notice that in the sentence, the committee is making the decision. The committee is acting upon the decision (“making” the decision). Here are more examples, for additional help:

- The man (subject) must have eaten (verb) five hamburgers (object).
- A fly (subject) careened (verb) into my soup (object)!

Passive Voice:

A sentence is termed “passive” when an object has a verb performed on it by the subject. In passive writing, the subject is acted upon, rather than acting itself:

- The decision was made by the committee.

Notice that in the sentence, the object (the decision) is acting upon the subject (the committee), rather than the other way around. Here are more examples:

- The five hamburgers (object) were eaten (verb) by the man (subject).
- My soup (object) was ruined (verb) by a fly (subject)!

Emphasis:

The stylistic choice of writing in active or passive voice is dependent upon the emphasis that you want to convey. For example, in the examples above, the active sentence says: “The committee made the decision.” In this sentence, the emphasis is on the committee. On the other hand, the passive sentence reads: “The decision was made by the committee,” and the emphasis rests on the decision itself. By choosing when to use each type of voice, your writing will become stronger and more cohesive.