

## Active vs. Passive Voice

If you've ever gotten feedback from a teacher or professor that told you to "stop writing in the passive voice," only to realize that you don't actually know what that means, or how to correct it, you're not alone. This handout is your guide to understanding what active vs. passive voice means and why passive voice is often discouraged in academic writing.

### Defining "Active vs. Passive"

A sentence written in the **passive** voice will have a subject that *receives* the action of the verb (i.e. the subject is acted upon), whereas a sentence written in the **active** voice, will have a subject that *performs* the action of the verb.

For example, here is a sentence written in the **passive** voice:

"It was mentioned earlier that stress can have negative effects on a person's health."

The subject ("It") is receiving the action of the verb ("mentioned"). Additionally, the sentence doesn't tell us who it was that mentioned the information, making the sentence less clear. Also note, using a form of the verb "to be" (in this case, "was") followed by the past tense of another verb (in this case, "mentioned") are clear indications that a sentence has been written in the passive voice.

Now, here's the same sentence written in the **active** voice:

"The researchers mentioned how stress can have negative effects on a person's health."

In this sentence, the subject ("researchers") is performing the action ("mentioned"). Using active voice, we find out who mentioned the information, and there is no longer the need for a "to be" verb.

### Choosing Active or Passive Voice

As the examples above show, sentences written in the passive voice can be less clear and contain more words than necessary, all of which can distract a reader from understanding the information the sentence is meant to convey. In this sense, passive voice should typically be avoided in argumentative, informative/summary, and creative writing papers, where easy to read, powerful language will be most effective in appealing to your audience.

That isn't to say passive voice should never be used though. It can be beneficial to use passive voice in certain types of research papers or lab reports where the person or thing performing the action isn't important, or when you need to emphasize the person or thing receiving the action more so than the person or thing performing it.

For example, here is a sentence that might be used in a scientific research paper:

“Study X was conducted by Dr. Smith and her colleagues to discover if...”

In this case, knowing who conducted the study isn't as important as knowing the purpose and results of the study itself, so passive voice works well.

Another example:

“Steve was chased by the dog.”

This is a very basic example of a type of sentence that might be used when describing a personal story related to your paper's topic, or even when writing creatively and focusing on a specific character.

## **Conclusion**

Therefore, the choice about whether to use active or passive voice can depend on a number of things, including the genre of writing you're using, and the information you want to focus on in your paper. Hopefully this resource will give you a better idea of how to make that decision, and how to react if you ever receive the infamous teacher feedback of “too much passive voice.”