

The Use Of The Passive Voice In Academic Writing

Most academic writing manuals caution students to avoid using the passive voice as the active voice is generally a clearer and more concise way to express an idea. Some spelling and grammar checkers in computer software programs even routinely identify passive constructions as incorrect. However, the passive voice can be effectively incorporated into academic writing given certain conditions.

What is the passive voice?

The placement of subject, followed by verb, and then object is the usual word order in English. In active voice sentences, the subject performs the action of the verb that follows: *The professor* (performer of the action, the subject) *cancelled* (verb) *his afternoon class* (receiver of the action, the object).

In passive constructions, the usual word order is flipped with the subject being the receiver of the action of the passive verb that follows: *The afternoon class* (receiver of the action, the subject) *was cancelled* (passive verb) *by the professor* (performer of the action, the agent).

The performer of the action, the agent, is included in a *by* clause: *by the professor*. This agent may be so unimportant that the *by* clause is omitted entirely: *The afternoon class* (receiver of the action, the subject) *was cancelled* (passive verb). The students need to know that the class was cancelled; whoever cancelled it is unimportant.

Passive voice verbs are formed by the verb BE conjugated in the desired tense followed by the past participle. Common verb forms used in the passive voice:

Verb form	Active voice	Passive voice (*The <i>by</i> clause is optional.)
simple present	Claire cancels class.	The class is cancelled (by Claire).*
simple past	Claire cancelled class.	The class was cancelled (by Claire).*
future with WILL	Claire will cancel class.	The class will be cancelled (by Claire).*
future with BE GOING TO	Claire is going to cancel class.	The class is going to be cancelled (by Claire).*
present progressive	Claire is cancelling class.	The class is being cancelled (by Claire).*
past progressive	Claire was cancelling class.	The class was being cancelled (by Claire).*
present perfect	Claire has cancelled class.	The class has been cancelled (by Claire).*
past perfect	Claire had cancelled class.	The class had been cancelled (by Claire).*
future perfect	Claire will have cancelled class.	The class will have been cancelled (by Claire).*

Why is the passive voice avoided in academic writing?

The passive voice is always wordier than the active voice and can lack clarity, for example:

- *Jonathan damaged Julie's car.* (active - 4 words) versus *Julie's car was damaged by Jonathan.* (passive - 6 words)

The active construction expresses the same idea as the passive one using fewer words. Conciseness is valued in academic writing.

- *Jonathan damaged Julie's car* (active). versus *Julie's car was damaged* (passive).
In the passive construction without the *by* clause, the reader does not know who damaged the car. The sentence lacks precision.
- In both cases, the active form effectively engages the reader by creating a mental image of Jonathan actually damaging Julie's car.

When is the passive voice used in academic writing?

While the active voice should be the default in academic writing, some use of the passive is acceptable.

1. When the object of a sentence is required to maintain the focus of a paragraph

Technicians test all electronic devices before they are shipped to customers. (active)

If your paragraph describes the workforce in a tech company, the active voice is preferred to maintain the focus of the text on the employee.

All electronic devices are tested before being shipped to customers. (passive)

However, if your paragraph centers on the quality of the devices produced by a company, the passive voice is employed to emphasize the device testing. Whoever verified the quality is not important.

2. When the subject is unknown or unimportant

Perry, one of my classmates, stole my laptop. (active)

The agent of this sentence, Perry, is known to the victim and is an important piece of information.

My laptop was stolen (by a thief)! (passive)

In this sentence, the thief is unknown, so the *by* clause is unnecessary. The important information is that the laptop was stolen.

3. To avoid the use of the first or third person, especially in the *Methods* section of a scientific paper

I added 1 ml of the reagent to each sample and noted any color change. (active)

One ml of the reagent was added to each sample and any color change was noted. (passive)

The use of *I* and other personal pronouns is avoided in academic writing.

The researchers interviewed a random sample of 30 students to determine their study habits. (active)

A random sample of 30 students was interviewed to determine their study habits. (passive)

In both cases, the reader could assume the identity of the agents, *I* and the *researchers*. Therefore, the agents are not required for meaning, and use of the passive voice would be acceptable. In addition, a *Methods* section is usually composed of a long list of steps to follow, so repeating each step in the active voice would be unnecessarily repetitive (e.g., I did this, and then, after 5 minutes, I did that.)

References:

<https://gwc.ucr.edu/sites/default/files/2019-01/Scientific-Writing-Active-and-Passive-Voice.pdf>

<https://www.aje.com/arc/writing-with-active-or-passive-voice/>

