

Biology Writing Resources – Passive Voice

What is the passive voice? First, let's be clear on what the passive voice isn't. Below, we'll list some common myths about the passive voice:

1. Myth: Use of the passive voice constitutes a grammatical error.

Use of the passive voice is not a grammatical error. It's a stylistic issue that pertains to clarity—that is, there are times when using the passive voice can prevent a reader from understanding what you mean.

2. Myth: Any use of “to be” (in any form) constitutes the passive voice.

The passive voice entails more than just using a being verb. Using “to be” can weaken the impact of your writing, but it is occasionally necessary and does not by itself constitute the passive voice.

3. Myth: The passive voice always avoids the first person; if something is in first person (“I” or “we”) it's also in the active voice.

On the contrary, you can very easily use the passive voice in the first person. Here's an example: “I was hit by the dodgeball.”

4. Myth: You should never use the passive voice.

While the passive voice can weaken the clarity of your writing, there are times when the passive voice is OK and even preferable.

5. Myth: I can rely on my grammar checker to catch the passive voice.

See Myth #1. Since the passive voice isn't a grammar error, it's not always caught. Typically, grammar checkers catch only a fraction of passive voice usage. Do any of these misunderstandings sound familiar? If so, you're not alone. That's why we wrote this handout. It discusses how to recognize the passive voice, when you should avoid it, and when it's OK.

What is the passive voice?

The passive voice is a grammatical construction. The easiest way to explain it is by contrasting it with the active voice. The active voice is the standard English sentence structure. The simplest possible sentences feature an actor (the subject), who does (the verb) something to either a person, animal or thing (the receiver).

Word	Mom	hugged	me
Semantic function	actor	direct verb	receiver

In the passive voice, the actor and receiver are switched around. The receiver then becomes the grammatical subject. Note that the meaning of the sentence stays the same, the only difference is the word order.

Word	I	was hugged by	mom
Semantic function	receiver	direct verb	actor

Why should you avoid the passive voice?

Let's cut to the chase: using the passive voice almost always makes your writing more distant and your message less clear. There are two main reasons for this.

1. It is wordy

Firstly, passive sentences are wordy. The passive alternative to an active sentence is simply longer. For example, consider these two sentences:

1. *The passive voice almost always makes your message less clear.*
2. *Your message is almost always made less clear by using the passive voice.*

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You convey the same message by using the passive but add three words. When overusing the passive form in your text, this can really add up.

2. The sentence structure is complex

Secondly, the passive voice uses a sentence structure which requires more cognitive effort. Your reader will spend valuable working memory on making sense of the sentence. This decreases the likelihood of you getting your message across.

Let's explore why the passive form demands more effort. As I told you before, the basic active sentence structure is quite consistent and logical in English. The passive voice turns this all the way around. You first read what was affected. Then you read what happened to it. Lastly, you learn how it was affected. You discover who or what was responsible only at the very end. This sequence differs from how we usually make sense of events.

Moreover, we expect the actor to be in the subject position, so we are slightly disoriented. This means constructing an image of what happens takes a tiny moment longer. Again, these moments can easily add up if you overuse the passive voice.

In the example I gave, there is no added benefit to using the passive: the active sentence conveys the same information. Whenever you use passive voice, always consider whether a better, active alternative is available.

When (and when not) to use the passive voice

If you're writing anything with a definitive subject who's performing an action, you'll be better off using the active voice. And if you search your document for instances of *was*, *is*, or *were* and your page lights up with instances of passive voice, it may be a good idea to switch to active voice.

That said, there are times when the passive voice does a better job of presenting an idea, especially in certain formal, professional, and legal discussions. Here are three common uses of the passive voice:

1 Reports of crimes or incidents with unknown perpetrators

My car was stolen yesterday.

If you knew who stole the car, it probably wouldn't be as big a problem. The passive voice emphasizes the stolen item and the action of theft.

2 Scientific contexts

The rat was placed into a T-shaped maze.

Who places the rat into the maze? Scientists, duh. But that's less important than the experiment they're conducting. Therefore, passive voice.

3 When you want to emphasize an action itself and the doer of the action is irrelevant or distracting:

The president was sworn in on a cold January morning.