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Active vs Passive Voice





Active Voice

Most basic English sentences are in active voice; these are sentences that begin with a *subject (person)*, then have a *verb (action)*, and end with an *object*.

Example: *Jane* *ate* the apple



Active voice is used when attention is drawn to the *subject* or *person* performing the *verb* in the sentence.



Passive Voice

Passive voice refers to when a sentence is written with an *object* and *verb (action)*, and may include a *subject (person)* at the end of a sentence (although not required).

Example: The apple was *eaten* [by **Jane**]

Object

Verb

Subject

Passive voice is usually used to draw attention to the *verb/action* and/or the *object* that the *verb* is acting on.

Although active voice is preferred in academic writing, the passive voice can be useful when used properly.

Active voice preferred

Active Voice: **Jane Smith** *discussed* the extent to which the U.S. was contributing to global carbon dioxide emissions.

Passive Voice: The extent to which the U.S. was contributing to global carbon dioxide emissions was *discussed* [by **Jane Smith**]

Note: When using verbs such as 'discuss,' 'suggest' or 'explain,' it is typically better to use the active voice. These verbs almost always require the presence of a speaker, so this information becomes important.



Passive voice preferred

Active Voice: **We** *used* 300ml of sulfuric acid as a solvent.

Passive Voice: 300ml of sulfuric acid was *used* as a solvent [by **us**].

Note: In scientific reports, it is common for writers to use the passive voice heavily in the methods section. The idea behind this is that the person carrying out the experiment should have nothing to do with the scientific results, so they do not need to be mentioned. Also, *how much* sulfuric acid is used is important, so it is given prominence in the sentence.



No Preference

Active Voice: **He** *stole* my wallet!

Passive Voice: My wallet was *stolen* [by **him**]!

Both are correct but one can be more appropriate depending on the context and what information needs emphasis.

One way to remember which voice to use is to think about them as questions.

Q: Who stole your wallet?

A: He stole my wallet

Here, active voice is *more appropriate* because the question involves **who** stole the wallet.

Q: What happened to your wallet?

A: My wallet was stolen.

Here, passive voice is *more appropriate* because the question is more interested in the wallet and what *happened* to it.