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SSC - 245

Active vs. Passive Voice

Overview: Using the passive voice in academic writing frequently causes problems for college students. Simply stated, sentences that contain the passive voice are often too wordy and lack focus, which makes it difficult for your reader to understand your main point. Active voice is usually more direct and livelier while passive voice is less direct and more descriptive.

The active voice is preferred in most, but not all, academic writing. Look out for forms of the verb *be* (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) which frequently signal the passive voice. These words do have legitimate uses, but if you can use an active verb instead, you should.

Example 1

Passive Voice: My cell phone was misplaced by me.

This sentence is overly wordy, and can be simplified by changing it to the active voice.

Active Voice: I misplaced my cell phone.

Example 2

Passive Voice: The door was slammed, causing the whole porch to shake.

In this sentence, it isn't clear who slammed the door. If that is what the author wanted, that's fine, but usually in academic writing we need more information.

Active Voice: Tricia slammed the door, causing the whole porch to shake.

Example 3

Passive Voice: It was claimed that childhood obesity is the result of shorter lunch breaks.

Again, it isn't clear who claimed this as a cause of childhood obesity.

Active Voice: The nutritionist claims that childhood obesity is the result of shorter lunch breaks.

Example 4

Passive Voice: Mistakes were made.

You've probably heard this sentence in apologies from public figures (Nixon). Note that it does not state who made mistakes, but uses passive voice as a rhetorical device to avoid placing blame on a particular person. In the active voice, it is obvious who is at fault.

Active Voice: We made mistakes.

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Practice: Whether to write in the active or passive voice is a matter of choice and style. Generally, academic writing is most effective and clear in the active voice. You can tell that you overuse the passive voice when you proofread a paragraph and discover your sentences have wordy, complicated expressions. Look through an essay and see how often verb phrases with “to be” appear throughout your writing. Be creative and learn to experiment with new arrangements of words; try to choose verbs that convey direct meaning and that can stand alone without the use of helping verbs.

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