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**SSC – 245**

**Passive Voice**

**Overview:** Learning when to use the passive and active voice in academic writing frequently causes problems for college students. Each one serves a different function, and using them incorrectly can result in misunderstanding or confusion for the reader.

**What is the passive voice?**

We typically think of the most basic English sentence as being in the **active voice**; it begins with the *subject*, then the *verb*, and usually ends with an *object*.

e.g. Jane ate the apple

S    V    O

The **passive voice** refers to a sentence structure that changes the component order to just the *object* and *verb*. The passive voice does not require a *subject*, but it can be included at the end.

e.g. The apple was eaten [by Jane]

O        "be" V    ["by" S]

It is frequently reported that the active voice is preferable in academic writing; in truth, however, when used correctly, the passive voice is also an invaluable tool in a writer's toolbox. Let's explore the different uses of both voices.

We typically use the **active voice** when we wish to draw attention to the person or subject performing the verb in the sentence.

Conversely, we usually use the **passive voice** when we wish to draw attention to the verb (action) and/or the object that the verb is acting on.

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**Example 1: 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].

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- ❖ 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.
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### **Example 2: 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].

- ❖ 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.
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### **Example 3: Neither preferred**

*Active Voice:* He stole my wallet!

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

- ❖ One way to remember the different uses of active and passive voice is to think of them as answering different questions:

#### **Q: Who stole your wallet?**

*A: He stole my wallet.*

- ❖ Here, you *could* use the passive voice, but the active voice is *more appropriate* because the question involves *who* stole the wallet. You would probably use this if you were trying to identify the man who stole your wallet, for instance.

#### **Q: What happened to your wallet?**

*A: My wallet was stolen.*

- ❖ Here, you *could* use the active voice, but the passive voice is *more appropriate* because the question is more interested in the wallet and what happened to it. With the passive voice, the reader then knows that it does not matter who did the stealing, it only matters that the wallet was stolen.

- ❖ In this example, neither the active nor passive voice is more correct, they simply have different functions.

**Notes:** It is safe to first use the active voice in your early drafts. Then, while reviewing your paper before submission, you can look for anything that might sound better in the passive voice

– take note that there might be nothing! Remember that the examples in this handout are not *rules* but *trends*; you might come across exceptions in your essays. As long as you pay attention to the *purpose* behind your sentences, you will become better and faster at identifying which is more appropriate.