

Wordiness and the Passive Voice

Active Voice is easier to understand than the Passive Voice, primarily because it's more direct with the actual subject doing the action.

Example: *Everyone made an effort.* (vs) *The effort was made by everyone.*

Notice that in the Passive Voice, the actual subject becomes an object. And what is really the object becomes the subject. BUT sometimes a sentence requires passive voice, especially when the subject is relatively unimportant compared to who/what receives the action. This approach is useful in discourse that wouldn't want to "expose" the subject, when the subject is understood by the reader, or when you'd like to hide the subject's agency. For example, in the examples below, the subjects are implied in the passive constructions.

Active: *We require twelve molecules of water to provide twelve atoms of oxygen.*

Passive: *Twelve molecules of water are required by us to provide twelve atoms of oxygen.*

"Better" Passive: *Twelve molecules of water are required to provide twelve atoms of oxygen. (actor deleted)*

Use passive voice when the "subject" is unknown or indefinite. You may delete that subject completely as well when it can be inferred by the reader.

Active: *People mastered the use of fire some 400,000 years ago.*

Passive: *The use of fire was mastered by people some 400,000 years ago.*

"Better" Passive: *The use of fire was mastered some 400,000 years ago. (actor deleted)*

Active: *The client revealed ADD tendencies in the results of the diagnostic measurement.*

Active: *The psychologist administered the ADD psych assessment to the client.*

Passive: *The psych assessment was administered by the psychologist to the client experiencing ADD.*

Passive: *The ADD diagnostic was taken by the client to identify ADD tendencies.*

Active: *The researcher made an error in estimating the length of time it takes an average 4th grader to finish the survey.*

Passive: *The length of time it takes an average 4th grader to finish the survey was underestimated.*

Remember, it's all about what is being emphasized. Passive voice is "highly marked," which means readers take notice when the subject of the sentence is absent. Unless you have a good reason to hide the subject, don't risk raising your readers' suspicion. Additionally, the passive voice adds extra words, and thus is frequently considered "wordy" by the reader. (Notice the passive voice in the previous sentence!)