



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. Writing clean sentences with the subject as the *doer* of the verb helps ensure clarity.

There are many times in writing for an educated audience that a sentence requires passive voice, especially when the subject is relatively unimportant compared to who/what is receiving the action. This situation occurs frequently in psychology papers where the subject is implied and/or you want to maintain anonymity. This approach is useful in psychological 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. In the examples below, the subjects are implied in the passive constructions.

Active: *We require twenty participants to demonstrate the effect of sleep deprivation on writing in this study.*

Passive: *Twenty participants are required by us to demonstrate the effect of sleep deprivation on writing in this study.*

"Better" Passive: *Twenty participants are required to demonstrate the effect of sleep deprivation on writing. (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 one's reader (notice the passive voice present here!).

By Anne Maxham, Ph.D.

Director of Writing, Antioch University