

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

Both active and passive voice **are used** in academic writing. There is a trend away from using the passive at present but in some science disciplines its use **is still encouraged**. (Note the use of the passive voice in this paragraph).

Active voice

In the active voice the subject of the sentence performs the action, e.g., the student asked the lecturer for help.

TIP

The active voice makes your writing:

clear ✓
concise ✓
direct ✓

Passive voice

The passive is used for a number of reasons:

- if the protagonist of the action is not known, e.g., my laptop was stolen from the library; or
- is unimportant, e.g., I was advised to apply for a visa.

Form of passive verbs

Passive verbs are formed using the appropriate tense of the verb 'to be' + the past participle.

| Tense 'to be' | Form |
|-----------------|---------------|
| Present | is/are |
| Past | was/were |
| Present perfect | has/have been |
| Future | will be |

Past participles often have the same form as the past tense, i.e., they usually end in 'ed', e.g., 'studied', 'experimented', 'argued'.

However, in English there are plenty of irregular verbs, e.g.,

| Past tense | Past participle |
|------------|-----------------|
| ran | run |
| chose | chosen |
| made | made |
| knew | known |

Sentences using the passive

- The site was chosen because it was very fertile.
- The decision about the site has been made already.
- The site is not known by many people.
- The event will be run again this year.

If you find you have written a passive sentence and you want to change it to active, you probably can. See below.

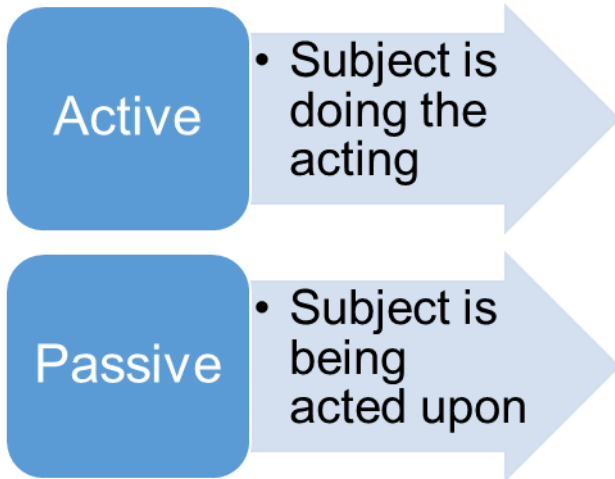
Compare the verbs

- *Lists of irregular verbs* can be found on Google (passive).
- You can find lists of *irregular verbs* on Google (active).

Notice you need to insert the subject 'You' in the active sentence.

Compare the verbs

1. *Data from across the globe* are published in **English language journals** (present tense, passive).
2. **English language journals** publish *data from across the globe* (present tense, active).



3. *A reliance on scholarly sources* was encouraged **by the lecturer** (past tense, passive).
4. **The lecturer** encouraged *a reliance on scholarly sources* (past tense, active).

Science writing

It is common to use the passive voice in technical and scientific writing, particularly in the methods and results sections.

Authors use the passive voice if they want to convey an impersonal, objective tone, or in instances where the person who did the action is not important, e.g.,

- The vials were filled with the solution (past tense, passive).
- The samples will be checked at two hourly intervals (future tense, passive).
- Barium has been mapped extensively in the world's oceans (present perfect tense, passive).

TIP

There is currently heated debate in scientific circles about the use of passive versus active voice, and conventions vary between disciplines and professors. It is a good idea to check which is preferred in your discipline before submitting written work for assessment.

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