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The Passive Voice

WHAT IS IT? HOW DO I SPOT IT? HOW CAN I USE IT?

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PASSIVE VOICE.

I always hated seeing my instructor scribbling those two words all over the papers I had turned in. Sometimes, the phrase was all over the place or even abbreviated to 'PV'; that's when I knew I really messed up.

Over time though, I learned that using passive voice isn't inherently bad. I've actually used it quite often when writing in the context of my major—Mechanical Engineering. In order to use both active and passive voice effectively, however, we must understand what the difference is, how to see it in our writing, and how to take advantage of it...



Among the most infamous uses of passive voice was President Nixon's spokesman Ron Ziegler saying "mistakes were made" as the Watergate scandal broke. Exactly *who* made the mistakes?

Just what are passive and active voice?

Before we dive in, a quick refresher on subjects and objects.

In sentences written in the active voice, the **subject** is the person or thing that 'does' the **verb** and the **object** is the person or thing upon which the subject acts:

1. The **governor** **ordered** the town's 15,000 **residents** to evacuate before the storm.
2. From time to time, **scientists** **have proposed** other **models** to account for the effect of temperature on enzyme activity and stability.

Sentences written in the passive voice differ from those in active voice in that they either omit the 'doer' of the verb entirely (1.a) or invert its place in the sentence (2.a). In English, the whole verbal construction usually grows a little bit longer as a result.

- 1.a. The town's 15,000 **residents** **were ordered** to evacuate before the storm.
- 2.a. Other **models** **have been proposed by** **scientists** from time to time to account for the effect of temperature on enzyme activity and stability.

Who ordered the evacuation (1.a)? We don't know! Could have been the governor—or someone with much less authority. That's often what makes passive voice poor writing. The actor might be clear to us when we're writing our sentences, but to an outside reader, passive voice leads to confusion. Even when passive voice does specify the actor (2.a), its wordiness relative to the active voice can still produce confusion and wasted time.

Three Steps toward Spotting Passive Voice

1. **Look for the subject of a sentence.** If your sentence doesn't explicitly name the person or thing that does the action, and instead has an 'object' as its subject, then it's usually passive voice! Sometimes this indicator can be difficult to gauge, as in the Nixon example (**mistakes were made**) where we have no idea who made the mistakes. It's sometimes easier to recognize in sentences that 'convert' what could be the subject into an object: "**models have been proposed by scientists**" is also in the passive voice.
2. **Look for what the verb 'acts on' and see if it is positioned as the sentence's subject rather than its object.** Note that both of our examples share this feature—this is perhaps the clearest signal of the passive voice.
3. **Look for helping verbs.** Helping or auxiliary verbs are forms of "to be" (was, were, are, is, been, being, will be, etc.), "to have," and "to do," among other verbs. Sometimes helping verbs are used in active voice, so it's no guarantee, but you'll often spot them in passive constructions. For instance, "**have been proposed**" includes them; if that sentence were in the active voice, it would eliminate the helping verbs ("**Scientists proposed models...**").

Should I Use the Passive Voice?

Passive voice isn't always bad! Sometimes, using passive voice is a choice you can make which stops unnecessary information from clogging up your paper. **The following sentences, for example, are deliberately, sensibly written in passive voice because the stating the 'doer' of the verb simply isn't necessary—it would be superfluous.**

Recently, the **Tappan Zee Bridge** **was demolished** to make way for a new bridge.

Arising from careful measurements of the thermal behavior of enzymes, a new **model**, the Equilibrium Model, **has been developed** to explain more fully the effects of temperature on enzymes.

In the first example, readers need to know that the bridge was demolished, not specifically who tore it down. In the second, it's already implied that the authors writing that scientific article are the ones who developed the new model; putting that sentence in passive voice also stresses that the results should be the same regardless of who does the experiment—and that's what makes passive voice standard in so many reports in STEM fields.

Yet there are also more insidious reasons people sometimes opt for passive voice: sometimes they may not want to be the subject of the sentence to be known, for instance to skirt responsibility. That's famously the case with the Nixon example. If it's important that your reader know the subject or doer of the action—who *made* the mistakes in that case—then go with the active voice.

Finally, remember that to change from passive to active voice just do the opposite of everything spelled out in the three steps above: add in the subject (or move it before the verb), make sure the object comes *after* the verb, and remove helping verbs when possible. In the words that Nixon's spokesman purposely avoided: **we made mistakes**. Not anymore!

Passive Voice: Possible Benefits

- Highlights the object (what the verb 'acts' on)
- Hides the subject
- Omits superfluous information

Active Voice: Possible Benefits

- Highlights the subject (the 'doer' of the verb)
- More concise sentences
- Gives a more complete picture