University of New Hampshire
Connors Writing Center

Active and Passive Voice

English has two voices, **active** and **passive**, which describe the relationship between the subject and the verb of the sentence. Understanding the use and effect of both voices will help you compose clearer, more powerful sentences.

Active Voice

In a sentence using **active voice,** the subject performs the action expressed by the verb.

The boy hit the ball.

The researchers have formed a hypothesis.

(The arrows point from the subject performing the action to the object being acted upon.)

Active voice is clearer and more direct because it identifies the actor. Using active verbs is a way to make your writing more powerful and concise. It also keeps the sentence from being too complicated or wordy.

Passive Voice

In a sentence using **passive voice**, the subject is being acted upon rather than doing the acting. The agent performing the action may be included in a "by the" phrase, or it may be omitted.

A ball was hit by the boy.

A hypothesis was formed by the researchers.

Avoiding Passive Voice

Many writers try to avoid passive voice because it can cloud meaning and create unnecessarily awkward, wordy sentences. Notice how much clearer the active voice is in these cases:

Passive: The quiz was failed by ten students.
Active: Ten students failed the quiz.

Passive: The crime will be investigated by the police.
Active: The police will investigate the crime.

Choosing Passive Voice

Passive voice emphasizes the action and/or the receiver of the action and may be more appropriate in certain rhetorical situations.

Using the passive voice makes sense when the agent performing the action is obvious, unknown, or unimportant. Example:

> A new, experimental lunch transplant operation was performed for the first time yesterday.

Writers in the sciences conventionally use passive voice in order to deemphasize their role as researchers and instead highlight procedures and results. Example:

> Heart rate and blood pressure were measured to gauge overall fitness.
