Passive Voice

What this handout is about

This handout will help you understand what the passive voice is, why many professors and writing instructors frown upon it, and how you can revise your paper to achieve greater clarity. Some things here may surprise you. We hope this handout will help you to understand the passive voice and allow you to make more informed choices as you write.

Myths

So what is the passive voice? First, let's be clear on what the passive voice isn't. Below, we'll list some common myths about the passive voice:

1. Use of the passive voice constitutes a grammatical error.

Use of the passive voice is not a grammatical error. It's a stylistic issue that pertains to clarity—that is, there are times when using the passive voice can prevent a reader from understanding what you mean.

2. Any use of "to be" (in any form) constitutes the passive voice.

The passive voice entails more than just using a being verb. Using "to be" can weaken the impact of your writing, but it is occasionally necessary and does not *by itself* constitute the passive voice.

3. The passive voice always avoids the first person; if something is in first person ("I" or "we") it's also in the active voice.

On the contrary, you can very easily use the passive voice in the first person. Here's an example: "I was hit by the dodgeball."

4. You should never use the passive voice.

While the passive voice can weaken the clarity of your writing, there are times when the passive voice is OK and even preferable.

5. I can rely on my grammar checker to catch the passive voice.

See Myth #1. Since the passive voice isn't a grammar error, it's not always caught. Typically, grammar checkers catch only a fraction of passive voice usage.

Do any of these misunderstandings sound familiar? If so, you're not alone. That's why we wrote this handout. It discusses how to recognize the passive voice, when you should avoid it, and when it's OK.

Defining the passive voice

A passive construction occurs when you make the object of an action into the subject of a sentence. That is, whoever or whatever is performing the action is not the grammatical subject of the sentence. Take a look at this passive rephrasing of a familiar joke:

Why was the road crossed by the chicken?

Who is doing the action in this sentence? The **chicken** is the one doing the action in this sentence, but the chicken is not in the spot where you would expect the grammatical subject to

be. Instead, the road is the grammatical subject. The more familiar phrasing (why did the chicken cross the road?) puts the actor in the subject position, the position of doing something—the chicken (the actor/doer) crosses the road (the object). We use active verbs to represent that "doing," whether it be crossing roads, proposing ideas, making arguments, or invading houses (more on that shortly).

Once you know what to look for, passive constructions are easy to spot. Look for a form of "to be" (*is, are, am , was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) followed by a past participle. (The past participle is a form of the verb that typically, but not always, ends in "-ed." Some exceptions to the "-ed" rule are words like "paid" (not "payed") and "driven." (not "drived"). Here's a sure-fire formula for identifying the passive voice:

form of "to be" + past participle = passive voice

For example:

The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath.

When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.

NOTE: forms of the word "have" can do several different things in English. For example, in the sentence "John has to study all afternoon," "had" is not part of a past-tense verb. It's a modal verb, like "must," "can," or "may"—these verbs tell how necessary it is to do something (compare "I have to study" versus "I may study"). And forms of "be" are not always passive, either—"be" can be the main verb of a sentence that describes a state of being, rather than an action. For example, the sentence "John is a good student" is not passive; "is" is simply describing John's state of being. The moral of the story: don't assume that any time you see a form of "have" and a form of "to be" together, you are looking at a passive sentence. "I have to be on time for the concert," for example, is not passive. Ask yourself whether there is an action going on in the sentence and, if so, whether whoever or whatever is doing that action is the subject of the sentence. In a passive sentence, the object of the action (e.g., the road) will be in the subject position at the front of the sentence. There will be a form of be and a past participle. If the subject appears at all, it will usually be at the end of the sentence, often in a phrase that starts with "by" (e.g., "by the chicken").

Let's briefly look at how to change passive constructions into active ones. You can usually just switch the word order, making the actor and subject one by putting the actor up front:

The metropolis has been scorched by the dragon's fiery breath.

becomes

The dragon scorched the metropolis with his fiery breath.

When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.

becomes

After suitors invaded her house, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.

To repeat, the key to identifying the passive voice is to look for *both* a form of "to be" *and* a past participle, which usually, but not always, ends in "-ed."

Clarity and meaning

The primary reason why your instructors frown on the passive voice is that they often have to

guess what you mean. Sometimes, the confusion is minor. Let's look again at that sentence from a student's paper on Homer's *The Odyssey*:

When her house was invaded, Penelope had to think of ways to delay her remarriage.

Like many passive constructions, this sentence lacks explicit reference to the actor—it doesn't tell the reader *who* or *what* invaded Penelope's house. The active voice clarifies things:

*After **suitors** invaded Penelope's house, she had to think of ways to fend them off.*

Thus many instructors—the readers making sense of your writing—prefer that you use the active voice. They want you to specify who or what is doing the action. Compare the following two examples from an anthropology paper on a Laotian village to see if you agree.

(passive) *A new system of drug control laws was set up.* (By whom?)
(active) *The Lao People's Revolutionary Party set up a new system of drug control laws.*

Here's another example, from the same paper, that illustrates the lack of precision that can accompany the passive voice:

Gender training was conducted in six villages, thus affecting social relationships.

And a few pages later:

Plus, marketing links were being established.

In both paragraphs, the writer never specifies the actors for those two actions (*Who* did the gender training? *Who* established marketing links?). Thus the reader has trouble appreciating the dynamics of these social interactions, which depend upon the actors conducting and establishing these things.

The following example, once again from that paper on *The Odyssey*, typifies another instance where an instructor might desire more precision and clarity:

Although Penelope shares heroic characteristics with her husband, Odysseus, she is not considered a hero.

Who does not consider Penelope a hero? It's difficult to tell, but the rest of that paragraph suggests that the *student* does not consider Penelope a hero (the topic of the paper). The reader might also conceivably think that the student is referring to critics, scholars, or modern readers of *The Odyssey*. One might argue that the meaning comes through here—the problem is merely stylistic. Yet style affects how your reader understands your argument and content. Awkward or unclear style prevents your reader from appreciating the ideas that are so clear to *you* when you write. Thus knowing how your reader might react enables you to make more effective choices when you revise. So after you identify instances of the passive, you should consider whether your use of the passive inhibits clear understanding of what you mean.

Summarizing history or literary plots with the passive voice: don't be a lazy thinker or writer!

With the previous section in mind, you should also know that some instructors proclaim that the passive voice signals sloppy, lazy thinking. These instructors argue that writers who overuse the passive voice have not fully thought through what they are discussing and that this makes for imprecise arguments. Consider these sentences from papers on American history:

The working class was marginalized.
African Americans were discriminated against.
Women were not treated as equals.

Such sentences lack the precision and connection to context and causes that mark rigorous thinking. The reader learns little about the systems, conditions, human decisions, and contradictions that produced these groups' experiences of oppression. And so the reader—the instructor—questions the writer's understanding of these things.

It is especially important to be sure that your thesis statement is clear and precise, so think twice before using the passive voice in your thesis.

In papers where you discuss the work of an author—e.g., a historian or writer of literature—you can also strengthen your writing by not relying on the passive as a crutch when summarizing plots or arguments. Instead of writing

It is argued that…
or *Tom and Huck are portrayed as…*
or *And then the link between X and Y is made, showing that…*

you can heighten the level of your analysis by explicitly connecting an author with these statements:

Anderson argues that…
Twain portrays Tom and Huck as…
Ishiguro draws a link between X and Y to show that…

By avoiding passive constructions in these situations, you can demonstrate a more thorough understanding of the material you discuss. You show that you're not a lazy, sloppy thinker.

Scientific writing

All this advice works for papers in the humanities, you might note—but what about technical or scientific papers, including lab reports? Many instructors recommend or even require the passive voice in such writing. The rationale for using the passive voice in scientific writing is that it achieves "an objective tone"—for example, by avoiding the first person. To consider scientific writing, let's break it up into two main types: lab reports and writing about a scientific topic or literature.

Lab reports

Although more and more scientific journals accept or even prefer first-person active voice (e.g., "then we sequenced the human genome"), some of your instructors may want you to remove yourself from your lab report by using the passive voice (e.g., "then the human genome was sequenced" rather than "then we sequenced the human genome"). Such advice particularly applies to the section on Materials and Methods, where a procedure "is followed." (For a fuller discussion on writing lab reports, see our handout on writing lab reports.)

While you might employ the passive voice to retain objectivity, you can still use active constructions in some instances and retain your objective stance. Thus it's useful to keep in mind the sort of active verbs you might use in lab reports. Examples include: support, indicate, suggest, correspond, challenge, yield, show.

Thus instead of writing
A number of things are indicated by these results.

you could write
These results indicate a number of things.
or *Further analysis showed/suggested/yielded…*

Ultimately, you should find out your instructor's preference regarding your use of the passive in lab reports.

Writing about scientific topics

In some assignments, rather than reporting the results of your own scientific work, you will be writing about the work of other scientists. Such assignments might include literature reviews and research reports on scientific topics. You have two main possible tasks in these assignments: reporting what other people have done (their research or experiments) or indicating general scientific knowledge (the body of knowledge coming out of others' research). Often the two go together. In both instances, you can easily use active constructions even though you might be tempted by the passive—especially if you're used to writing your own lab reports in the passive.

You decide: Which of these two examples is clearer?

Heart disease is considered the leading cause of death in the United States. (passive)
or *Research points to heart disease as the leading cause of death in the United States.*(active)

Alternatively, you could write this sentence with human actors:

Researchers have concluded that heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States.

The last two sentences illustrate a relationship that the first one lacks. The first example does not tell who or what leads us to accept this conclusion about heart disease.

Here's one last example from a report that describes angioplasty. Which sounds better to you?

The balloon is positioned in an area of blockage and is inflated.
or *The surgeon positions the balloon in an area of blockage and inflates it.*

You can improve your scientific writing by relying less on the passive. The advice we've given for papers on history or literature equally applies to papers in more "scientific" courses. No matter what field you're writing in, when you use the passive voice, you risk conveying to your reader a sense of uncertainty and imprecision regarding your writing and thinking. The key is to know when your instructor wants you to use the passive voice. For a more general discussion of writing in the sciences, see our handout.

"Swindles and perversions"

Before we discuss a few instances when the passive might be preferable, we should mention one of the more political uses of the passive: to hide blame or obscure responsibility. *You* wouldn't do this, but you can learn how to become a critic of those who exhibit what George Orwell included among the "swindles and perversions" of writing. For example:

Mistakes were made.

The Exxon Company accepts that a few gallons might have been spilled.

By becoming critically aware of how others use language to shape clarity and meaning, you can learn how better to revise your own work. Keep Orwell's swindles and perversions in mind as you read other writers. Because it's easy to leave the actor out of passive sentences, some

people use the passive voice to avoid mentioning who is responsible for certain actions.

So when is it OK to use the passive?

Sometimes the passive voice is the best choice. Here are a few instances when the passive voice is quite useful:

1. To emphasize an object. Take a look at this example:

100 votes are required to pass the bill.

This passive sentence emphasizes the number of votes required. An active version of the sentence ("The bill requires 100 votes to pass") would put the emphasis on the bill, which may be less dramatic.

2. To de-emphasize an unknown subject/actor. Consider this example:

Over 120 different contaminants have been dumped into the river.

If you don't know who the actor is—in this case, if you don't actually know who dumped all of those contaminants in the river—then you may need to write in the passive. But remember, if you do know the actor, and if the clarity and meaning of your writing would benefit from indicating him/her/it/them, then use an active construction. Yet consider the third case.

3. If your readers don't need to know who's responsible for the action.

Here's where your choice can be difficult; some instances are less clear than others. Try to put yourself in your reader's position to anticipate how he/she will react to the way you have phrased your thoughts. Here are two examples:

Baby Sophia was delivered at 3:30 a.m. yesterday.(passive)

and
Dr. Susan Jones delivered baby Sophia at 3:30 a.m. yesterday.(active)

The first sentence might be more appropriate in a birth announcement sent to family and friends —they are not likely to know Dr. Jones and are much more interested in the "object"(the baby) than in the actor (the doctor). A hospital report of yesterday's events might be more likely to focus on Dr. Jones' role.

Summary of strategies

Identify

- Look for the passive voice: "to be" + a past participle (usually, but not always, ending in "-ed")
- If you don't see both components, move on.
- Does the sentence describe an action? If so, where is the actor? Is he/she/it in the grammatical subject position (at the front of the sentence) or in the object position (at the end of the sentence, or missing entirely)?
- Does the sentence end with "by..."? Many passive sentences include the actor at the end of the sentence in a "by" phrase, like "The ball was hit **by the player**" or "The shoe was chewed up **by the dog**." "By" by itself isn't a conclusive sign of the passive voice, but it can prompt you to take a closer look.

Evaluate

- Is the doer/actor indicated? Should you indicate him/her/it?
- Does it really matter who's responsible for the action?
- Would your reader ask you to clarify a sentence because of an issue related to your use of the passive?
- Do you use a passive construction in your thesis statement?
- Do you use the passive as a crutch in summarizing a plot or history, or in describing something?
- Do you want to emphasize the object?

Revise

- If you decide that your sentence would be clearer in the active voice, switch the sentence around to make the subject and actor one. Put the actor (the one doing the action of the sentence) in front of the verb.

Towards active thinking and writing

We encourage you to keep these tips in mind as you revise. While you may be able to employ this advice as you write your first draft, that's not necessarily always possible. In writing, clarity often comes when you revise, not on your first try. Don't worry about the passive if that stress inhibits you in getting your ideas down on paper. But do look for it when you revise. Actively make choices about its proper place in your writing. There is nothing grammatically or otherwise "wrong" about using the passive voice. The key is to recognize when you should, when you shouldn't, and when your instructor just doesn't want you to. These choices are yours. We hope this handout helps you to make them.

Works consulted and suggested reading

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

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