

Aggie Grammar Guide: Passive vs. Active Voice (Style)

Passive voice can be useful in certain scenarios (like some science writing, when the doer is unknown, or when you want to deemphasize the doer). However, passive voice can be imprecise, slow the reader down and disrupt the sentence focus. It can also confuse readers, which could make you appear less credible or knowledgeable. While passive voice has been widely used in science writing, it is becoming more acceptable to write in the active voice even when you do not emphasize the researcher. Always check with your professors about their preferences regarding passive/active voice and read current published writing within the discipline to see which they utilize.

Revising Passive Voice

Step one:

Identify **to be** verbs (*is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) followed by a *past participle*.

- Example: When Chris Hadfield went to the space station to carry out his mission, he **was required** to do some experiments based on questions from middle school students in Canada.

Identify **to be** verbs followed by a *past participle* and connected to a **by**-phrase.

- Example: Although I blushed all the time and did not speak as fluently as native speakers, my question **was appreciated by the professor**.

Step two: Choose one or more of the following options

Ask yourself: Who did what to whom? Or what did what to whom/what? The answer will help you revise the sentence to make it active. This can help with imprecise sentences.

- Example: The Free Economic Society **was forced** to cut down on their public activity since it was overstepping its boundaries by promoting anti-government ideas. (Without the doer, the reader cannot understand the wider implications of this action.)
- Revision: (*Who?*) **The government** (*Did What?*) **forced** (*To What?*) **the Free Economic Society** to cut down on their public activity since it was overstepping its boundaries by promoting anti-government ideas. (Now the reader sees the doer and understands the deeper implications of the issue.)

Find a noun, adjective or adverb that could be turned into a verb to clarify and strengthen the action of the sentence.

- Example: As technology improved and people began having a better idea about bicycles, a new **innovation was created**.

- Revision: As technology improved and people began having a better idea about bicycles, **they innovated**.

Move information around and use a stronger verb, but don't change the meaning. Additionally, you can use an abstract subject. This can help with passive voice that disrupts sentences or causes confusion.

- Example: When a higher score **is earned by pre-med students**, they think they are better and smarter than their classmates.
- Revision: **Scoring** higher **makes** pre-med students think they are better and smarter than their classmates. ("Scoring" is an abstract subject.)

Show ownership instead of relying on passive voice:

- Example: To respond to the questions that **were asked by students**, such as how to brush teeth in space and if people can cry in space, Hadfield did experiments in space and posted them on YouTube.
- Revision: To respond to **the students' questions**, such as how to brush teeth in space and if people can cry in space, Hadfield did experiments in space and posted them on YouTube.

Active writing in STEM, emphasizing the what not the who:

Create active voice in science writing without emphasizing the researcher; you can focus on what happens during the process, what the process does or what one thing does to another with more precision. You can also write: **the research/data show/suggest/reveal** to make your sentences more active without emphasizing the doer.

- Example: Unlike the series hybrid, in the parallel hybrid, the gasoline **engine was enabled** to work with the electric motor to power the car, which means that **the transmission is turned by the engine** and electric motor at the same time, and the **wheels are turned by the transmission**.
- Revision: Unlike the series hybrid, the **parallel hybrid enables** the gasoline engine and electric motor to work together to power the car, which means that **both** the engine and the electric motor **turn** the transmission at the same time, and the **transmission** then **turns** the wheels.

Necessary Passive Voice

Sometimes passive voice is necessary to maintain meaning, clarify ideas, or emphasize a point. It can also be useful when you are not allowed to use **I** or **you**, you don't know the doer, or you cannot find a subject that does something to the object.

- Example: The hybrid car **is designed** to address these concerns. (It doesn't matter who designed it. We also cannot change the verb to **addresses** because the point is not that the hybrid actually addresses these concerns but that it's meant to address these concerns.)

- Example: In addition, guideposts **were installed** to direct cyclists, and light posts **were added** to help with night riding. (We don't know who did this, nor does it really matter.)

Use passive (**the research was collected**) instead of active (**I conducted the research**).

- Example: Research **was conducted** in order to better understand how eating impacts health. (What matters is the research, not who did it.)

Aggie Grammar Guide: Passive vs. Active Voice (Style)

Intermediate Practice

Revise the following sentences to eliminate passive voice without altering meaning.

Please note, because revising passive voice deals with style more than grammar rules, there may be multiple correct ways to revise each sentence, although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your revision to the answer and determine if one is more effective. One way to do that is to determine which revision has fewer words but still maintains the original sentence's meaning.

*Example: Citizenship **was created by voluntary associations** which **have been noted** for leading people to express themselves and form associations outside the government.*

*Revision: Voluntary associations **created** citizenship, which **led** people to express themselves and form associations outside of the government.*

- 1) Japan is known to have some of the most damaging earthquakes all around the world.

- 2) This is revealed in the first paragraph of the short story when Montessor says: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity" (Mays 108).

- 3) The honey bee is being annihilated by pesticides.

- 4) Food is connected to religion in these two countries by the meaning of the food used in Catholicism.

- 5) In order to determine Montessor's motives, the reader is compelled to "decipher the circumstances in the story" (Baraban 48).

Advanced Practice

In the following sentences, some passive constructions cause confusion. If a sentence is confusing and should be revised to active voice, revise it to clarify the idea without losing meaning. Are there any sentences that must remain passive? If so, in complete sentences explain why.

Please note, because revising passive voice deals with style more than grammar rules, there may be multiple correct ways to revise each sentence, although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your revision to the answer and determine if one is more effective. One way to do that is to determine which revision has fewer words but still maintains the original sentence's meaning.

*Example: One major smart phone, the iPhone, which **is produced by Apple Inc.**, has a big share on the industry.*

*Revision: One major smart phone, **Apple Inc.'s iPhone**, holds a major share of the industry.*

*Example: Montresor's comment on Fortunato's costume, "How remarkably well you are looking today!", **is linked** to his intentions (Barban 54).*

Necessary passive: The verb phrase "is linked" is necessary because what matters here is the relationship between the comment and Motresor's intention. If the writer changed the sentence to include the subject linking the two things (the author of the story), the meaning of the sentence would change and possibly cause confusion.

- 1) The second conducted experiment depended on what the teenagers were exposed to at a young age, whether it was sexual behavior, sexual plans, or the risks of sexual activity was their outcome of how they perceived sexual activity in their life.

- 2) This is one thing that is argued that kept Russia going for as long as it did before World War I.

- 3) My so-called accent is only one example out of many where my conscience is troubled by the comments I hear because of my race and ethnicity.

- 4) In addition, new transportation has been developed.

- 5) With a better understanding and knowledge, a chain that linked the two wheels on a bicycle was created.

- 6) The reasons are well concluded by Humboldt State University, which is one of those universities that offers online education.

Aggie Grammar Guide: Passive vs. Active Voice (Style)

Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

What follows are possible revisions to alleviate passive construction in order to clarify ideas or make the sentence more precise.

- 1) Japan's **earthquakes are** the most damaging in the world.
- 2) The **first paragraph** of the short story **reveals** this when Montresor says: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity" (Mays 108).
- 3) **Pesticides are annihilating** the honey bee.
- 4) The **meaning** of the food used in Catholicism **connects** these two countries.
- 5) The **desire** to determine Montresor's motives **compels** the reader to "decipher the circumstances in the story" (Baraban 48).

Advanced Practice

What follows are possible revisions that alleviate passive constructions while clarifying meaning.

- 1) The second **experiment revealed** that teenagers' perception of sexual activity depended on whether they were exposed to sexual behavior, sexual plans, or the risks of sexual activity at a young age.
- 2) **Historians argue** that this kept Russia going for as long as it did before World War 1.
- 3) When **people comment** that I have a so-called accent, **it troubles** my conscience **because of what that might mean** about my race and ethnicity.
- 4) In addition, new transportation has been developed. (NECESSARY PASSIVE: We don't know, nor does it matter, who developed it; what matters is it was developed).
- 5) Once **designers learned** more about bicycles, **they created** a chain that linked the two wheels. (OR: A better **understanding** of how a bicycle functions **necessitated** the creation of a chain that linked the two wheels.)
- 6) As one university that offers online education, Humboldt State's **conclusions merit** attention.