

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.)