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Sometimes, the way in which something is expressed can be as important as what is being said. In academic writing, people naturally want to come across as being objective, and this often includes using the 'passive voice'. But exactly what is the passive voice (vis-à-vis the active voice), and is it always right to use it in academic writing? This article explains what the active and passive voices are and gives some suggestions about when to use each. Active and passive voice explained Consider this sentence: Exploratory interviews were completed by six of the participants. This is an example of a passive construction: the action ('were completed') is performed on the subject of the sentence ('six of the participants'). Now have a look at this (active) version of the sentence: Six of the participants completed exploratory interviews. Here, the six participants are now at the beginning of the sentence, and rather than the action being performed on them, they are performing the action ('completed' being the verb). This might seem like a subtle distinction, but there are two things that are worth noting about this active sentence: It is slightly shorter and easier to read. It emphasises the participants (people) rather than the interviews (objects). Using active and passive voice As noted, people writing in academic contexts have traditionally relied on the passive voice. Some people believe that it sounds more 'scientific', but more recently this view has been falling out of favour. Also, people can be particularly reluctant to use the active voice if it means that a sentence will include first-person pronouns ('I' or 'we'), and they may even have been taught (especially in certain countries/cultures) to avoid them altogether in scientific writing. However, if you look at recent articles in high-impact-factor journals, you will see that it is now very common for researchers to use them. Consider this sentence, which might be found in the Discussion section of a paper: It was demonstrated that the efficiency of the reaction was notably increased by the use of the selected combination of catalysts. This could come across as overly 'factual', and some would call it 'dry'. If it is rephrased into the active voice, it becomes shorter, and is also more engaging: We demonstrated that our selected combination of catalysts notably increased the efficiency of the reaction. Active voice: Showing researchers in action Note that with the active voice, the researchers themselves are 'put back into the action of the research'. This can be important for how the reader reads, understands and values what is being communicated in the sentence, thus making the paper – and the scientific discoveries or innovations that it presents – more 'accessible'. (Learn more about writing your paper as a narrative in this article: Telling a story in your research paper) Deciding whether to use passive voice So, should the passive voice be avoided? No, the passive voice can be useful. For example, in the Methods section of a paper, what was done is probably more important than who did it. Similarly, in the Results section, describing your findings objectively may be simpler in the passive voice. Finally, it is always worth considering exactly what you want to emphasise. Taking the first example given in this article, are the 'participants' or the 'interviews' more important? If you want to focus on the interviews, then the passive voice is appropriate because it puts them at the beginning of the sentence. Summary The subject of a passive sentence has the action performed on it; in an active sentence, the subject performs the action. Using the active voice changes the emphasis of a sentence, and usually makes it shorter; it also often means that it will contain 'I' or 'we'. The passive voice can be appropriate in the Methods and Results sections. However, particularly in the Discussion section of a paper, using the active voice can improve the flow of your writing and help it to have greater engagement, which is a key aim of writing. Maximise your publication success with Charlesworth Author Services. Charlesworth Author Services, a trusted brand supporting the world's leading academic publishers, institutions and authors since 1928. To know more about our services, visit: Our Services A sentence is considered to be in passive voice when the subject of a sentence is the object being acted on. Active voice, on the other hand, is where the subject is the one doing the acting. In the 20th century, passive voice was a dominant characteristic of scientific writing; however, there has been a discernible shift in consensus in recent years. Most writing guides (such as APA [6th edition, section 3.18]), root for the active voice for clarity and conciseness. According to scholars, the general opinion is that the passive voice makes writing flat and insinuates evasion of responsibility in writing of any form, not just scientific writing. In fact, some scholars have actually shown that active voice was the preferred form till the beginning of the 20th century when the trend of objectivity became favored. According to Ding (1998), in writing, the world should essentially be represented "in terms of objects, things, and materials." Passive voice can obscure agents and readers can lose sight of the relevance of a prose that is dominated by things and objects. However, in the art of writing, polarized views often become irrelevant and a balance must be achieved by using the two voices contextually. After all, human agents are responsible for designing experiments...writing awkward phrases to avoid admitting their responsibility and their presence is an odd way of being objective. Jane J. Robinson The APA recommends that verb tenses and voices should be used carefully. Try not to be reluctant to utilize the active voice – particularly in the Discussion section, where it is imperative to express that it is you supposing certain things and having specific assessments. In the Methods section, it is satisfactory to break the dullness of numerous passive voice sentences with the usage of the active voice. A response on Quora (John Geare, 2015) sums up the required balance in a succinct manner: In academic writing, passive voice is used to describe a process, the results of study, or similar material which is objective in nature. But active voice is used to describe actions. Related: Having trouble with grammar and punctuations in your research paper? Get help from native language experts now! John Geare provides a specific example for clarity. My colleagues A, B, [names changed] and I, designed an experiment to test the impact on worker perceptions of well-being when domesticated cats were allowed to freely roam various work environments in which the subjects were normally employed. Three test environments were selected for our experiments: a law office, a laboratory in which experiments were performed using laboratory rats, and an automobile assembly line. One-way mirrored glass panels were installed to allow video cameras to record the activity, and researchers to observe the same and take notes. We secretly inserted observers directly into the work environment. These observers posed as outside contractors, and were uniformed as maintenance and cleaning staff, coffee and water service vendors, and similar supporting personnel. The observers were drawn from the students who were matriculated into the experimental psychology courses from which this study had been developed as an example of such studies generally. You can check the references for more information on the usage of active and passive voice across writing styles. References: Vijith Assar (2015, September 3) An Interactive Guide To Ambiguous Grammar. Retrieved from Josh Bernoff, WOBBS LLC (2016, April 26) A passel of pernicious passive voice (Master Post). Retrieved from Duke University Scientific Writing Resource. Passive Voice in Scientific Writing. Retrieved from Leong Ping Alvin (2014, March 13) The passive voice in scientific writing. The current norm in science journals. Retrieved from Language and Learning Online. Active or passive voice? Retrieved from [contact-form-7 id="40123" title="Global popout two"] Home » English Grammar » Active vs Passive Voice » Using Passive Writing » Active vs. Passive Voice in Academic Writing: What You Need to Know Estimating the readability of writing demands a unique blend of clarity, precision, and professionalism. Whether you're crafting a research paper, essay, or thesis, the goal is to ensure your ideas are not only understood but also taken seriously. Achieving this often comes down to how you structure your sentences—and one critical choice is between active and passive voice. Active and passive voice aren't just grammar concepts; they're powerful tools that shape the tone and flow of your writing. Knowing when to use each can make all the difference, especially in academic settings where both clarity and objectivity are key. In this post, we'll explore the differences between active and passive voice, their strengths and weaknesses, and how mastering them can elevate your academic writing to the next level. Looking to take your skills even further? Check out The English Master Course by Professor Scott Mendoza, a top-rated course that breaks down essential grammar, including active and passive voice, to help you communicate with confidence and precision. Table of contents Active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. This structure is direct, clear, and often the preferred choice for making your writing concise and engaging. Example: "The researcher conducted the experiment." Notice how the subject (the researcher) is doing the action (conducted). Active voice is particularly effective when you want to emphasize the actor or the person performing the task. Mastering active voice is a crucial step toward improving your academic writing
skills. For detailed lessons and practical exercises, check out The English Master Course by Professor Scott Mendoza, which covers everything from basic grammar to advanced sentence structuring. Passive voice, on the other hand, flips the focus of the sentence. Here, the subject receives the action rather than performing it. This structure is often used in academic writing to emphasize results, processes, or the object of the action rather than the actor. Example: "The experiment was conducted by the researcher." Passive voice can be useful in specific contexts, like when the actor is unknown or irrelevant, or when you want to maintain a neutral tone. However, overusing it can make your writing less dynamic and harder to follow. To gain a better understanding of verb structures and improve your ability to switch between active and passive voice, try MossLingua. Its spaced-repetition flashcard method is a scientifically proven way to help you master verb conjugations and sentence construction efficiently. Active voice is a powerful tool for making your writing clear and engaging. Here's why it stands out: Clarity and Directness: Active voice makes sentences straightforward by focusing on who is performing the action. This ensures your message is easy to understand. Reader-Friendly: By keeping the sentence structure concise, active voice allows readers to follow ideas effortlessly. Example: "We analyzed the data thoroughly." This structure highlights the subject ("we") and the action ("analyzed"), making it immediately clear who is responsible for the work. To practice writing in active voice and refine your grammar, explore The English Master Course by Professor Scott Mendoza. This course offers practical exercises designed to help you write with confidence and precision. While active voice is often the preferred choice, certain contexts in academic writing may require a more neutral tone. Objectivity in Research Papers: In scientific and technical writing, passive voice is frequently used to maintain objectivity and focus on results rather than the researcher. Emphasis on Results: Passive voice shifts the emphasis to the action or outcome, which is sometimes more appropriate in methodologies or conclusions. Example: "The data were collected systematically." In cases like these, passive voice removes the focus from the researcher and places it on the process, aligning with formal academic standards. If you're unsure about when to use active or passive voice, consider working with a writing coach on Italki. Italki connects you with native-speaking tutors who can provide personalized feedback on your writing, ensuring it meets academic standards. Passive voice is often chosen in academic writing for its ability to create a formal and objective tone. Here are some key benefits: Objectivity: Passive voice helps maintain neutrality, focusing on the action or result rather than the actor. Formal Tone: It lends a more formal, polished feel to your writing, which is often required in academic settings. Example: "The samples were analyzed using spectroscopy." This sentence emphasizes the process of analysis rather than the individual conducting it, making it ideal for research papers and formal reports. To see more examples of passive voice in authentic academic texts, explore LingQ. LingQ provides access to real-world articles, research papers, and more, helping you understand how passive voice is used in professional contexts. While active voice is valuable for clarity, there are specific instances in academic writing where passive voice is more suitable: Methodology Sections of Research Papers: Passive voice is often used here to emphasize procedures over the researcher. Example: "Data were collected from various sources." When the Subject is Unknown or Irrelevant: Passive constructions allow you to focus on the action or outcome, which is crucial when the doer is unimportant or unknown. Example: "Anomalies were observed in the data." By using passive voice in these situations, your writing can better meet academic conventions and expectations. For a more interactive way to learn and recognize passive voice, try LingPie. LingPie offers language learning through movies and TV shows, complete with interactive subtitles that allow you to see passive voice in real-life contexts. Finding the right balance between active and passive voice is essential for effective academic writing. Here are some general guidelines to help you decide: Use Active Voice for Clarity: When your goal is to make the subject and action clear, active voice is the better choice. It works especially well in introductions, discussions, and conclusions where the emphasis is on the researcher's actions or findings. Example: "We conducted a survey to gather feedback." Use Passive Voice for Formality: In sections like methodology or when the subject performing the action is irrelevant, passive voice creates a more formal tone. Example: "A survey was conducted to gather feedback." Striking a balance involves mixing both styles depending on the context. This ensures your writing is not only clear but also aligns with academic conventions. Editing your academic writing to balance active and passive voice doesn't have to be overwhelming. Follow these tips to refine your work: Identify Passive Voice: As you review your text, highlight sentences that use passive voice. This will help you decide if it's necessary or if switching to active voice would improve clarity. Revise for Clarity: Replace unnecessary passive constructions with active ones. Example: Change "It was concluded that..." to "We concluded that..." Focus on Context: Keep passive voice where it serves a specific purpose, like emphasizing the process or results in your methodology. Read Aloud: Hearing your sentences out loud can help you spot areas where the balance feels off. For in-depth editing strategies and guidance on grammar precision, enroll in The English Master Course by Professor Scott Mendoza. This course offers practical tools to help you refine your writing and master active and passive voice usage with ease. Understanding the differences between active and passive voice is essential for mastering academic writing. Active voice provides clarity and directness, while passive voice adds formality and shifts focus to results or processes. Knowing when and how to use each can help you create balanced, impactful writing that meets academic standards. Ready to take your writing to the next level? Enroll in The English Master Course by Professor Scott Mendoza. This comprehensive course is designed to refine your grammar skills, teach you when to use active and passive voice, and enhance your overall confidence as a writer. For even more support in your English-learning journey, check out these valuable tools: MossLingua: Improve your vocabulary retention with a scientifically backed, spaced-repetition method. Italki: Get personalized feedback from native-speaking tutors to refine your writing. LingPie: Learn by watching movies and TV shows with interactive subtitles to see grammar in action. LingQ: Access real-world academic texts to understand how passive voice is used in professional contexts. Mastering English grammar doesn't have to be difficult. With the right resources and strategies, you'll be able to write with precision, authority, and confidence. Start today! What is the main difference between active and passive voice? Active voice emphasizes the subject performing the action, while passive voice highlights the action itself or the object receiving it. For example, in active voice, "The student wrote the essay," whereas in passive voice, "The essay was written by the student." Master both structures with The English Master Course by Professor Scott Mendoza, which provides detailed lessons and exercises. Is active voice always better than passive voice? No, active voice is great for clarity and directness, but passive voice is preferred in formal or objective contexts, like academic writing. For example, passive voice is commonly used in research papers to emphasize results or methods. Tools like Italki can help you practice choosing the appropriate tone for your writing. When should I use passive voice in academic writing? Passive voice is ideal in methodology sections, scientific reports, or when the subject is unknown or irrelevant. For example, "The data were analyzed using statistical software." Want to see more examples? Check out LingQ for access to professional and academic texts. How can I tell if I am using too much passive voice? You can identify excessive passive voice by reviewing your sentences for phrases like "was conducted" or "were analyzed." Active voice should dominate most parts of your writing to maintain clarity, while passive voice can be used strategically for formal sections. For practical editing tips, enroll in The English Master Course. What tools can I use to improve my grammar and voice usage? Several tools can help enhance your grammar and writing skills: MossLingua: Perfect for mastering verb conjugations with spaced repetition. LingPie: Learn grammar by watching subtitled movies and shows. The English Master Course: A comprehensive resource for mastering active and passive voice, grammar, and academic writing skills. How do I balance active and passive voice in academic writing? The key is to use active voice for clarity and passive voice for formal or neutral contexts. For instance, use active voice in introductions and conclusions, and passive voice in methodology sections. If you need guidance on achieving this balance, The English Master Course offers practical examples and editing strategies. The subject (doer) is put at the beginning of the sentence and performs the action. The object (done to) of the action is placed after the verb at the end of the sentence. In the following sentence 'The team' is the subject, the 'optimum pH' the object.
The team calculated the optimum pH. The active voice is usually more concise than the passive voice puts the subject at the sentence beginning - better if the subject is at least as important as the object. Passive Voice The object of the action is placed at the beginning of the sentence. The subject is placed after the verb. This sentence construction sometimes needs additional words with the main verb, such as 'is, was, are, being...[verb]...by' The optimum pH was calculated by the team. The passive voice sounds more formal so invites use in science can sound duller can use more words enables a more impersonal tone When should I use passive, when active? Some believe that you should not use the active voice in formal scientific writing because scientific writing should be impersonal. Ultimately, you should use the style of language with which supervisors and co-authors feel most comfortable. Further, some journals provide guidance on writing style and prefer authors to use the active voice (always read a journal's 'Instructions for Authors'). Using the active voice does not mean you need to use a person's name or personal pronoun ('I' or 'we'). Take the example: 'Process X improves yield.' This is the active voice but does not need a personal pronoun. The passive version is fine 'Yield is improved by using process X,' but it uses more words. I and We It is now acceptable to use 'we' in formal science writing. Further, in thesis writing the occasional use of 'I' can be appropriate - for example when indicating that you have decided to use a particular method from a number of alternatives. However in disciplines such as the physical sciences, using the first person ('I') is often less acceptable. So check with your supervisor or PI, or other colleagues and a journal's Instructions for Authors. If you are uncertain about what a passive or active style reads like, compare the following two abstracts. The passive version has nine instances of the passive voice and 131 words. The active version has six instances of the active voice and three in the passive; the word count is 122 words. Example 1: passive style Bioscurity is defined as a set of measures to protect animals and crops from the risk of disease. It is considered important in pig production, and several routine measures are employed by farmers (e.g. cleaning, disinfection, segregation). However, air as a potential vector of pathogens has long been disregarded. Filters for incoming and recirculating air were installed into the ventilation system of one of two barns at a fattening piggyery. Over three consecutive fattening periods, the lung health of pigs in the filtered compared with the unfiltered barn was evaluated. Air filtration was easily introduced into the existing ventilation system. Better lung health was found in animals from the barn equipped with recirculating air filtration modules. Therefore, air filtration systems in animal rearing enclosures should be recommended by animal healthcare professionals. Example 2: active style Bioscurity is defined as a set of measures to protect animals and crops from the risk of disease. It is important in pig production, and farmers routinely employ several measures (e.g. cleaning, disinfection, segregation). However, air as a potential vector of pathogens has long been disregarded. We installed filters for incoming and recirculating air into the ventilation system of one of two barns at a fattening piggyery. Over three consecutive fattening periods, we compared the lung health of pigs in the filtered and unfiltered barn. Air filtration was easily introduced into the existing ventilation system. Animals had better lung health in the barn equipped with recirculating air filtration modules. Therefore, animal healthcare professionals should recommend air filtration systems in animal rearing enclosures. (Adapted from: Wenke C. et al. (2018). Impact of different supply air and recirculating air filtration systems on stable climate, animal health, and performance of fattening pigs in a commercial pig farm. PLoS One 13.3: e0194641) The active voice is appropriate: when readers/journals express a preference/expect the active voice to avoid/cut down excessive use of words to identify the subject and/or take responsibility. The passive voice is appropriate: the most readable text is often a combination of active and passive voice (as in example 2 above) to achieve a balance with the active voice, particularly in the 'methods' section of a manuscript when the subject is not known, obvious or irrelevant: Artificial intelligence has been the subject of considerable research for decades. (By whom? ... It doesn't matter.) when the object/recipient is the main topic: These dangerous emissions are produced by diesel engines. (While the focus is 'dangerous emissions' and not diesel engines.) Avoid passive voice in scholarly writing when it creates unnecessary wordiness and confusion. In particular, be on the look out for these two common problematic passive voice constructions. Over 18, 2025 In an active voice construction, the subject is performing the action. In a passive voice construction, the subject is being acted upon. Although some students believe they should never use the passive voice, there are circumstances in which it is the most appropriate choice. Overview, this brief overview from Purdue OWL explains when and why to use active or passive voice, accompanied by illustrative examples. Writing in an Academic Style Video: this useful UWC-produced resource explores a number of style features in academic writing, including (at 3:41) how to tell the difference between active and passive voice, and when to use each. Passive Voice: the comprehensive guide busts the myths of passive voice, describes strategies, explains when it is appropriate to use, and more. Back to top Forthcoming sessions on ... : Taught students Staff Researchers Show details & booking for these sessions CITY College Please ensure you sign up at least one working day before the start of the session to be sure of receiving joining instructions. There are no sessions currently scheduled for this topic, but take a look at our full training list to check if anything has slipped through our automated net, or get in touch with it-training@york.ac.uk to enquire about future scheduling. 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You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation. No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Last Updated: 20 August 2024 | Blog Author: Jeremy Miles You must understand what voice to use in academic writing because choosing either an active or passive voice significantly impacts your writing. Although neither voice, active or passive, is wrong to some extent, each serves its purpose in academic writing when utilized appropriately. This means that using active or passive voice might be a preference in some forms of writing while a taboo in others, as we are yet to see. Understanding Sentence Structure (Subject, Verb, Object) In terms of sentence structuring, sentences must contain a subject and a verb at a minimum. The subject refers to who or what the sentence is about. The verb refers to what the subject is doing. For example, when you write a sentence: "Mary yelled." Mary is the subject, while yelled is the verb that the subject is doing. If the action or verb is being done to something, something becomes the object. In other words, the object is the receiver of an action. Example: "Ronald threw the ball." Ronald is the subject, threw is the verb, and the ball becomes the object. You can have more than one word, thing, or person as subject, verbs, and object. However, to maintain a clear structure, ensure that you follow the subject, verb, object arrangement even in such situations. Example: "My childhood friend and my roommate performed a song and a play at the event." In this example, play and song are the objects, performed becomes the verb, and childhood friend and roommate are the subjects. Active vs. Passive Voice In active voice, the subject of the sentence comes first and performs an action that the sentence is describing. Thus, active voice emphasizes the person or agent who performs an action – the subject or actor. For example: The available evidence supports the topic The principal commended the students On the other hand, passive voice refers to when the object or sometimes the action of a sentence comes first. In this case, in passive voice, it is the subject of the sentence is the object being acted on. Example: Evidence was found to support the topic The principal commended the students The student completed the essay The writing center has helped many students in formatting papers When to use active voice Using an active voice is preferred in academic writing since it is strong, concise, and clear. 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some cases and allowed in some, because it does not portray a confident tone. Research suggests that writing in active voice ensures that you provide cogent, solid, precise, and clear arguments. The active voice should be used when writing the introduction and discussion sections of a research paper, proposal, term paper, thesis, or dissertation. This is because you discuss previous research and introduce your own research. Developing short and strong sentences Active voice is preferred when you want to develop strong yet short sentences. It allows you to create a clear, direct, and more concise sentence, which can be helpful in avoiding clunky and wordy passive sentences. Passive: In this comparison of tourism experience in UAE, Australia, and the US, it is evident that a country's enabling environment promotes tour companies' success. Active: A comparison of tourism experience in the UAE, Australia, and the US reveals that an enabling environment in a country promotes the success of tour companies. Emphasize on the subject You can also use active voice when you want to emphasize the subject. For example: Active: X and Y proposed a new model that incorporates the principles of success, which inherently addressed the weaknesses of other models: Passive: A new model incorporating principles of success and inherently addressing the weaknesses of other models was proposed by X and Y. In this case, active voice sounds like the best choice. The passive voice is clunky and awkward. You can use active voice in your literature review section When to use Passive Voice Although active voice is preferred when writing essays for its ability to ensure clarity and create direct sentences, sometimes using passive voice is inevitable. 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There are no sessions currently scheduled for this topic, but take a look at our full training list to check if anything has slipped through our automated net, or get in touch with it-training@york.ac.uk to enquire about future scheduling. There's more training events at: Share – copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation. No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Last Updated: 20 August 2024 | Blog Author: Jeremy Miles You must understand what voice to use in academic writing because choosing either an active or passive voice significantly impacts your writing. Although neither voice, active or passive, is wrong to some extent, each serves its purpose in academic writing when utilized appropriately. 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