

Passive and Active Voice

Passive Voice occurs when the subject of the sentence is unclear. The subject often becomes the object of the action instead of the doer.

Active Voice has a clear subject acting on the verb and is generally considered more acceptable in academic writing.

Examples of passive voice:

Sentence 1: The dog was known to bite.

Sentence 2: During research, it was found that water evaporated faster in sunlight.

Passive voice can lead to confusion and wordiness.

Detecting Passive Voice

How do we know if we're writing in passive voice?

When written in passive voice, the subject often becomes the object, like this: *The dog was walked by the boy.*

"Boy" should be the subject but is instead the object of the preposition in the phrase "by the boy."

In some sentences, the object is not even clear, like this: *The dog was walked.*

By Cats Test

One simple way to detect if we are using passive voice is the "by cats" test.

If we can insert the phrase "by cats" after the verb and the sentence makes sense, we need to revise to active voice.

Here is an example:

The dog was walked "by cats."

Does the sentence make sense? While a cat walking a dog is not probable, the sentence itself makes sense; therefore, we know we are in passive voice.

How might we revise this sentence to ensure active voice?

Hint: Ensure the doer of the action is the subject.

Answer: The cats walked the dog.

Avoiding Passive Voice

- **Use a clear subject**
Always make sure the one doing the action is clear. While this seems simple, avoiding passive voice and staying in third person may be tricky. Finding third person subjects will help: they, some, people, he, her, or simply using a noun like researchers or writers can help avoid passive voice.
- **Try a different verb tense**
Using a linking verb plus a past tense verb almost forces the use of passive voice. Using a stronger verb can help. For instance, instead of “was walked,” we can usually just use “walked.” Stronger verb choices lead to stronger writing.
- **Avoid too many phrases**
Using too many complex phrases within a sentence can cause passive voice. Sometimes simple, concise sentences are better.

Changing Passive Voice to Active Voice

Passive Sentence 1: The dog was known to bite.

Active: The owners knew the dog would bite.

Passive Sentence 2: During research, it was found that water evaporated faster in sunlight.

Active: Researchers found water evaporates faster in sunlight.

Passive Sentence 3: After the test, the results were shown to be inconclusive.

Active: The testers found the results were inconclusive.

Passive Sentence 4: It was found to be unclear why people preferred red.

Active: No one knows why people prefer red.

These are not the only choices, but using them as a guide will help avoid passive voice.