

ACTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE VOICE

The way in which you write can have a major impact on *how* what you want to say comes across. A major concept concerning this issue within academic writing is the idea of the active voice and the passive voice. You'll have to get your head around a little English grammar, but it may help you to write more effectively.

■ What's the difference?

With the **active voice**, the **subject** of the sentence performs the *action*. A popular example to demonstrate this is:

The dog bit the boy

With the **passive voice**, the *action* is performed on the **subject** of the sentence, highlighting instead the **receiver** of the action. For example:

The boy was bitten by the dog

You can recognize the passive voice because it almost always includes the verb "to be", for example, as "is", "was", "were", etc. It'll also probably include the words "by the" (as in the example above).

You can see that the second sentence in the passive voice is longer than the sentence in the active voice. In general, writing in the active voice is more **direct**, which assists in making your writing more concise and forceful.

The passive voice, on the other hand, is more **indirect**. It's generally wordier, and regarded as weaker and ambiguous.

■ Using the active and passive voice

In academic writing, it's traditional to use the **passive voice**. This is primarily because it allows you to avoid using personal pronouns or proper names, i.e., "I", "you", "me", etc. This makes your writing appear more **objective** and **unbiased**.

The **passive voice** is also effective when:

- ▶ you want to focus on those experiencing a particular action or on the action itself
- ▶ you don't want to repeat who the person/people carrying out the action is/are
- ▶ you don't want to name the actor(s) involved
- ▶ if you don't know who the actor(s) is/are

However, nowadays, many journals accept – if not encourage – the **active voice**. This is because, as mentioned before, it helps make writing more **concise**.

Nevertheless, you should never consider one as *always* right and the other *always* wrong: you need to use both purposefully in order to get your meaning across.