

# Using the active and passive voices

This guide looks at the active and passive voices: what they are, how to use them, and their place in a range of stylistic features associated with academic writing. It is recommended that you use this guide with the related one on *Academic Writing*.

## What are the active and passive voices?

The active and passive voices are simply different forms taken by a verb depending on whether the subject of the sentence is performing the action of the verb (active voice) or whether it is being acted upon by someone or something else (passive voice). For example:

### Active Voice

Michael wrote a literature review.

### Passive voice

The literature review was written by Michael.

In the active voice, the literature review is written by Michael, who is the subject of the sentence. It is Michael who performs the action of the verb (the *writing* of the literature review). In the passive version, the literature review, which forms the subject of the sentence, is being acted upon (was written) by Michael, who is performing the action of this verb.

## Identifying the passive voice

The passive voice can often be identified by the use of the verb 'to be' together with a past participle. Thus, using the example above:

was	written	by Michael
'to be'	past participle	agent

When it is necessary to introduce the agent (the person or thing) who is performing the action of the verb, it is usually done by including 'by' followed by the agent.

## Active and passive voices in academic writing

In some subjects, particularly in the sciences, or in reflective writing, you would quite naturally use the active voice without thinking. Describing the methodology used in a science

experiment, or an experience you had while on a professional placement, would be very difficult to do in the passive voice. But in many subjects, it is not uncommon to move between the two, something you will undoubtedly see in published work. Why do authors do this? It comes down to style. The passive voice, at times, might be used to avoid repeating the name of an author whose work you are using, for example. Consider the following short extract:

A study was recently conducted into the population density of certain inner-city suburbs of London. Spencer (2017) found that . . . .

In this example, the author has used the passive voice in the first sentence as a way of introducing Spencer's research. In other words, it is not wrong to use the passive voice.

## Problems with the passive voice

Students are often told not to use the passive voice. Furthermore, the passive voice is often highlighted as incorrect by grammar-checking software. Why is this?

To put it simply, the passive voice is considered to be less precise or exact than its active counterpart.

As you will see in the guide on academic writing, one of the hallmarks of high quality academic writing is precision in the expressions used. You need to state your points clearly to get across their meaning *exactly* as you intend. Since the passive voice effectively 'hides' the subject of the sentence, it is considered to be less appropriate to academic writing. If you look once again at the Spencer example above, you will notice that if the second sentence (beginning 'Spencer (2017)') had not been included, we wouldn't know who wrote the study referred to in the first sentence.

## Summary

Think carefully about how you use the passive voice. It isn't wrong, but does its use make the meaning of your points less clear?