

The Passive Voice in Academic Writing

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

When writing, we have the option to construct sentences using the active or the passive voice. The difference between active voice and passive voice is to do with the relationship of the **subject** of a sentence to the **verb**.

Here's a sentence using active voice:

- **The researchers** wrote the paper.

In active voice, the subject of the sentence (the researchers) carried out the action or verb (wrote). The object of the sentence (the paper) is the thing being acted on i.e. the paper was produced as a result of the researchers' writing.

Here are the same elements used to construct a sentence in the passive voice:

- **The paper** was written by the researchers.

In passive voice, the subject (the paper) does not have an active relationship to the verb (was written) i.e. the paper did not do the writing, but was written by someone else. The subject of this sentence is the thing being acted on. The person/thing that carried out the verb (the researchers) is indicated by the preposition "by".

Recognising the Passive Voice

Passive voice can be easily recognised by the use of "by + someone" or "by + something". Furthermore, it always uses some tense of the verb "to be" + the past participle of the verb in question. Here's a few more examples:

- **The markets** are influenced by political changes.
- **Teachers** will be affected by the changes to the curriculum.
- **Changes in the DNA** were observed by the scientists.

In each case, the sentence subject (the markets, teachers, changes in the DNA) has an indirect or passive relationship to the verb. The subject did not carry out the verb. Also, each sentence contains by + something/someone (political changes, changes to the curriculum, scientists). They all use some form of the verb "to be" (are, will be, were) with a past participle (influenced, affected, observed).

HOWEVER

Not all uses of the passive voice will include the "by +" part of the sentence. In the final example above, "by the scientists" is not necessary for the sentence to make sense. It is possible to write simply:

- **Changes in the DNA** were observed.

This is still in passive voice as the subject (changes in the DNA) does not have a direct relationship to the verb (were observed). We still have the option to add "by the scientists".

When to Use the Passive Voice in Academic Writing

The passive voice can be useful in academic writing in the following ways:

1. To avoid the first person

I will discuss Kant's philosophical theories in this essay. (active) → Kant's philosophical theories will be discussed in this essay. (passive)

2. In scientific writing

The scientists added reagent to the sample. (active) → Reagent was added to the sample. (passive)

3. To emphasise the thing being acted on

Developers launched Google Translate in 2006. (active) → Google Translate was launched in 2006. (passive)

4. When the person/thing carrying out the action is not known or unclear

Someone ambushed the troops at night. (active) → The troops were ambushed at night. (passive)

When to Avoid the Passive Voice in Academic Writing

You should avoid overusing the passive voice. It can be helpful in the above situations but can also lead to problems in your essay. Below are common examples of times when students use the passive voice inappropriately.

1. When the student has not done enough research

Studies have been conducted on the importance of exercise. ? **Issues:** Who conducted these studies? Why are the names of the studies not listed here?

2. When the point is unclear or confusing

Both DCU and UCD applied for the patent in 2012. It was granted the following year. ? **Issues:** Who was granted the patent? Did they both receive it?

3. When the sentence becomes wordy and unnecessarily complex

The research which had been undertaken by the university was critiqued from an ethical point of view and was promptly retracted by them. ? **Issues:** Sentence doesn't flow and is awkward. The use of three passive structures makes the sentence wordy.