

## Passive Voice: What It Is and How to Avoid It (and When to Use It)

**What is the passive voice?** Passive voice is a sentence structure in which the subject of the sentence *receives* the action of the verb. (This is a flip of active voice's structure in which the subject *performs* the action of the verb). One of passive voice's characteristic features is that it always uses some form of the verb 'to be'. Passive voice is most often discouraged in academic writing (with notable exceptions—see below).

Passive Voice: *Netflix was watched all day by Sophie.*

Active Voice: *Sophie watched Netflix all day.*

The active voice sentence above is clearer because the subject is Sophie, the person who is doing the watching, and Netflix, which is being watched, is the object of the sentence.

**Why is avoiding passive voice important?** The passive voice is most often avoided in an academic setting. One reason is for the sake of clarity: in a sentence written in passive voice, it is often unclear who or what is doing the action of the sentence. Writing in the active voice makes a sentence more direct. A more comprehensive reason to avoid passive voice is that it is usually important to identify the "who" of a situation. If the people involved in the action are not clearly called out as such in the sentence, they are not receiving proper credit for their actions. Active voice helps writers avoid this problem because the doer of the action is clearly and directly stated.

### Examples of Turning Passive Voice Sentences into Active Ones:

#### History

Passive: *The sale and distribution of alcohol **was outlawed by** the National Prohibition Act.*

Active: *The National Prohibition Act **outlawed** the sale and distribution of alcohol.*

#### Philosophy

Passive: *After **Glaucon's argument was refuted by Socrates**, we began a discussion about an ideal city.*

Active: *After **Socrates refuted Glaucon's argument**, we began a discussion about an ideal city.*

#### Theology

Passive: *When I read this essay, **I was reminded** of our class discussion about faith.*

Active: ***This essay reminded me** of our class discussion about faith.*

#### English

Passive: *The green light **is used by** Fitzgerald as a symbol of Gatsby's longing for Daisy.*

Active: *Fitzgerald **uses** the green light as a symbol of Gatsby's longing for Daisy.*

**Are there any exceptions when passive voice is acceptable?** Yes. In some scientific writing, passive voice may be encouraged because the research methods or data being discussed are more significant than the individual researcher, and the researcher(s) is known by context as the performer of the actions, writer of the report, etc. (Think of the Methods section of a report.) Another rationale for using passive voice in scientific writing is to project objectivity in the writing. Please note, however, that there is an increasing trend to using active voice in scientific writing. The best guideline would be to think carefully about what is most important in any particular statement—what do you wish to emphasize? The performer of the action or the recipient of the action?

**Passive voice on purpose for emphasis:** *The amygdala is negatively impacted by traumatic experiences.* In this example, the amygdala (the brain's 'fight or flight' center) is the intended focus of the statement; the writer is not focusing on the traumatic experiences. If the writer instead did want to focus on those kinds of experiences, they might choose to write actively: *Traumatic experiences negatively impact the amygdala.*