



Writing Resources Center

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Avoiding the Passive Voice

Grammatically, the passive voice is made up of a form of “to be” and a past participle. Some examples of the passive voice include: “is believed,” “was seen,” “was written,” “will be considered,” and “are shown.”

Using the passive voice usually leads to excessively wordy, weak writing. In most cases, you should replace the passive voice with the active voice.

For example, take the following passage:

The shelter is owned by the town, but it is run by members of the humane society and is supported, in part, by funds raised by them. The bulk of the operating funds, however, are supplied by the town.

By replacing the passive voice with the active voice, this passage becomes more concise:

Although the town owns the shelter and pays most of the operating costs, members of the humane society run the facility and provide additional support through fund raising.

**Quick Tip: Note that the word “by” often follows the passive voice in the first passage. A quick search for any form of “to be” or the word “by” in your document can help you identify the passive voice. In Microsoft Word, “Ctrl + F” will open your search function.*

You should also avoid using the passive voice because it often fails to answer the question, “By whom?” Failing to answer this question can give the impression that the writer is being purposefully evasive, whether this is the writer’s intent or not. The passive voice can also obscure historical agency. For example, the sentence, “The slaves were freed,” leaves the reader wondering, “By whom? Their own actions? Their masters? Legislation? The Union army?” This is a reminder that a simple search for the word “by” will not identify all passive constructions. Consider the following sentences:

Passive voice

The senator admits some privileges were abused.
Because of increased taxation, prices will be raised soon.
Appropriate measures will be taken.
Workers went on strike because they were treated unfairly.

Active voice

The senator admits that the committee abused its privileges.
Prices will rise because the government raised taxes.
The boss will take appropriate measures.
Workers went on strike because the company owners treated them unfairly.

Should I always avoid the passive voice?

The passive voice can be used effectively if the subject or actor is either unknown or unimportant. For example, lab reports are usually written in the passive voice. The passive voice may also be used to add sentence variety. Use your own judgment, but always make clear historical agency when it is identifiable.