

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

by Tina Blue

If there is one thing most people remember from their high school or college composition classes, it's that you are not supposed to use the passive voice in your writing.

But like most of the "rules" of writing (and many of the "rules" of grammar and usage), this one isn't really a rule. There are some times when the passive voice is appropriate, and some times when it is even needed.

In general, it is best to think of writing not as rule-driven, but rather as context-sensitive.* Even if a "rule" is useful 99% of the time, rigidly applying it in the rare case where it isn't appropriate will undermine the effectiveness of your writing. I prefer to think of most of the so-called rules of writing as guidelines, some more generally applicable than others.

The rule against using the passive voice happens to be an appropriate guideline most of the time. You are more likely to write badly by ignoring it than by following it. But it's still better to make your writing choices consciously than to go on automatic pilot and let the "rules" do all your writing for you.

What is the passive voice, and what is it used for?

Verbs in English are inflected to show five main traits: **person, number, tense, voice, and mood.**

Voice is determined by whether the **subject** of the sentence is the *agent* or the *receiver* of the action of a **transitive verb**. (A **transitive verb** is one that takes a **direct object**.**)

~I broke the window.

~The boys ate all of the pie.

With the money from her mother's life insurance Diane bought a new car and took a trip to Europe.

In the preceding examples, which are in the **active voice**, the *agent* of the action is the **subject** of the sentence. But in the next set of examples, which are in the **passive voice**, the *receiver* of the action is the **subject** of the sentence.

~The window was broken.

~The window was broken by me.

~All of the pie was eaten.

~All of the pie was eaten by the boys.

With the money from her mother's life insurance a new car was bought and a trip to Europe was taken.
With the money from her mother's life insurance a new car was bought and a trip to Europe was taken by Ann.

Notice that when a sentence is written in the passive voice, the agent of an action can be omitted. That is part of the appeal of the passive voice to certain writers. If the writer wishes to obscure responsibility for an action, then the passive voice allows him to eliminate all reference to the person who committed the act. Think of how often statements coming out of the Nixon White House during Watergate were couched in the passive voice: *e.g.*, **Mistakes were made.**

Even if the agent of an action is mentioned in a passive voice sentence, the emphasis is not on the actor, but on the receiver of the action. The subject slot in a sentence is the starring role. Anyone or anything relegated to a little sidecar of a prepositional phrase tacked on at the end of the sentence is not being emphasized at all.

~The window was broken.

~The window was broken by me.

~All of the pie was eaten.

~All of the pie was eaten by the boys.

In these sentences, the fact that **the window was broken** or that **the pie was eaten** sits front and center. In the examples without agents, no one in particular appears to be responsible for the broken window or the devoured

pie. And even in the sentences where the guilty parties make an appearance, they do so in a way that does not call attention to them.

But sometimes the agent of an action *needs* to be omitted. For example, the **textual conventions**^{****} governing lab reports do not permit the use of the first person ("I" or "we") at all, and in fact any mention of the researchers, even in the third person, is frowned upon. Thus, lab reports are filled with clauses like these: *the pigeons were observed over a period of three weeks; the subjects were divided into three groups; members of the control group were given a placebo. . . .*

The reason for this convention is that science is supposed to be objective, and removing all reference to the researchers emphasizes that stance of objectivity. It's almost as if disembodied hands are performing the experiments, and disembodied eyes are observing the results.^{****}

The use of the passive voice in lab reports also keeps the spotlight focused on the experiment itself, rather than yanking it over to the researchers. It's a matter of emphasis.

Now, here are a few passive voice sentences from earlier in this very article, and from another article.

~Notice that in these sentences, the fact that the window was broken and the pie was eaten sits front and center.

~Anyone or anything relegated to a little sidecar of a prepositional phrase tacked on at the end of the sentence is not being emphasized at all.

~Another problem with many English classes is that students are usually taught by teachers that think writing is "rule-driven."

Now watch what happens to my intended meaning and emphasis if I try to recast these as active voice sentences:

~Notice that in these sentences, the fact that someone broke the window and someone ate the pie sits front and center.

~When anyone or anything is relegated to a little sidecar of a prepositional phrase tacked on at the end of the sentence, then the writer is not emphasizing that person or thing at all.

~Another problem with many English classes is that the teachers usually think that writing is "rule-driven."

Obviously, the sentences using the passive voice convey my meaning more precisely. **In the first two, switching to the active voice moves the emphasis away from the points I wish to emphasize.** And in the third sentence, I have completely lost the reference to the students.

The 95% "rule"

I think of the passive voice as one of the tools available to me as a writer. A handyman has many tools, and some of them are needed more often than others. But just because hammers and screwdrivers are appropriate for more tasks than some of the more exotic tools in his toolbox, that doesn't mean he should just throw away all of the other tools. At some point he is bound to come across a task that calls for that weird little thingamajig he almost never uses, and when that happens, he will use that very thingamajig, not a hammer or a screwdriver. On the other hand, he would be very foolish to try using that odd little tool when all he wants to do is drive a nail or tighten a screw.

Even though it is true that the passive voice is sometimes needed, that doesn't mean it should be used very often. I tell my own students to make sure that *at least* 95% of their verbs are in the active voice.^{****}

In fact, even that may be too generous. **No passive voice verb should be allowed to stand unless it can justify itself.** In other words, every time you use a passive verb, ask yourself why you are using a passive construction there. If you don't have a good reason for it, then rewrite the sentence to use the active voice. **Many, even most, of your essays will have no need at all for the passive voice, so keep it tucked away in the bottom of your toolbox and bring it out only to do those jobs that can't be done by the active voice.**