

Active vs. Passive Voice

Overview

It's one thing to tell someone "use active voice"; it's another to know that the recipient of that advice knows what active voice is. What follows below are excerpts from a number of writing books. A Works Cited list is at the end.

Active Voice—What Is it and Why Use it?

David Beer and David McMurrey, in *A Guide to Writing as an Engineer*, provide a good description of active voice, give reasons for using the active voice, and provide comparisons (examples in the table are adjusted to be in side-by-side format):

The active voice directly states that someone does something, as in *The engineer wrote the report*. The passive voice turns it around to *The report was written by the engineer*. Thus the active voice emphasizes the performer of the action—the engineer...—while the passive emphasizes the recipient of the action, the report.

Sentences become more vigorous, direct, and efficient in the active form, and by showing that a *person* is involved in the work, you are doing no more than admitting reality. Also, the active voice gives credit where credit is due.

Poor [in passive voice]	Improved [changed to active voice]
Control of the flow is provided by a DJ-12 valve.	A DJ-12 valve controls the flow.
A system for delineating these factors is shown in Figure 5.	Figure 5 shows a system for delineating these factors.
By switching off the motor when it started to vibrate and looking at the tachometer, the resonant frequency was determined.	We determined the resonant frequency by switching off the motor when it started to vibrate and looking at the tachometer.
The button is pressed twice.	Press the button twice.
Previously entered data in the database is eliminated by the Edit menu being opened and Select All being chosen.	Eliminate previously entered data in the database by opening the Edit menu and choosing Select All.
Several references were checked out from the library and 25 pages of notes were taken.	I checked out several books from the library and took 25 pages of notes.

(Beer and McMurrey, 52-53)

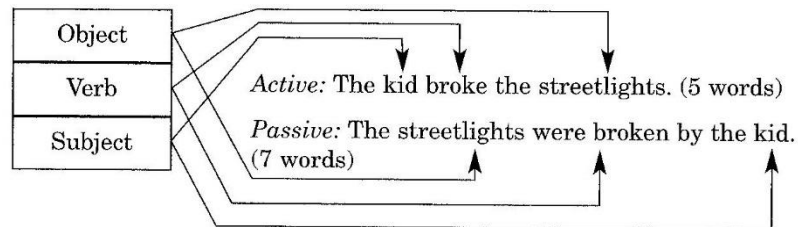
Then there's some guidance from the American Psychological Association (APA) *Publication Manual* (42–43): "Verbs are vigorous, direct communicators. Use the active rather than the passive voice, and select tense or mood carefully" (American Psychological Association, 42-43). Examples given include the following (reformatted here for easier comparison):

Poor [in passive voice]	Improved [changed to active voice]
The survey was conducted in a controlled setting.	We conducted the survey in a controlled setting.
The experiment was designed by Simpson (2001).	Simpson (2001) designed the experiment.
The participants were seated in comfortable chairs...	Participants sat in comfortable chairs...

Visual Representations of Voice

Finkelstein's Diagram Format

In his *Pocket Book of Technical Writing for Engineers and Scientists*, Leo Finkelstein, Jr. presents an excellent diagram that compares two sentences—one active, and one passive. Note that the sentence written in active voice reduces the number of words (read: space) it takes to say the same thing: (Finkelstein, 234) You can see that size comparison in the first table on the previous page as well.



Murdick and Bloemker's Structural Analysis of Voice

Then there are William Murdick and Jonathan Bloemker. In their book *The Portable Technical Writer*, they provide an engineer-focused interpretation and breakdown of active and passive voice—they put it into a formula. Here's how they present it in a way scientist and engineers might appreciate (Murdick and Bloemker 2001, 109):

NP = noun phrase
 AUX = auxiliary verb (have, be, or modal auxiliary)
 V = main verb
 -en = the past-participle form of the verb (verbs usually take an *-ed*, *-en*, or *-t* inflection in the past participle form, as in *helped*, *given*, *spent*.
 BE = the verb *be* as a required verb in the passive-voice constructions (*be* takes these forms: *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *been*, *being*, *be*)
 () = optional (for example, sentences require a V but no AUX, so we put parentheses around AUX) (see below)

Active	Passive
NP ₁ + (AUX) + V + NP ₂	NP ₂ + (AUX) + BE + V ^{en} + (by + NP ₁)
With no auxiliary verb:	
Sarah wrote the manual	The manual was written by Sarah.
Sarah always writes the manual	The manual is always written by Sarah.
With <i>have</i> or <i>be</i> :	
Sarah has written the manual.	The manual has been written by Sarah.
Sarah is writing the manual.	The manual is being written by Sarah.
With a modal auxiliary (<i>can</i> , <i>could</i> , <i>will</i> , <i>would</i> , <i>shall</i> , <i>should</i> , <i>may</i> , <i>might</i> , <i>must</i>):	
Sarah should write the manual.	The manual should be written by Sarah.
With a modal auxiliary (<i>have</i> , and <i>be</i>):	
Jeff could have been editing the manual by now.	The manual could have been being edited by now.
Distinguishing features of the passive voice:	
The verb <i>be</i> followed by a past participle, and the presence or possibility of a <i>by</i> phrase.	

When MIGHT Passive Voice Be Okay?

Passive voice isn't always inappropriate.

APA's Interpretation—When You Want To Focus On the Object/Recipient of the Action

The APA states that:

The passive voice is acceptable...when you want to focus on the object or recipient of the action rather than on the actor. For example, "The speakers were attached to either side of the chair" emphasizes the placement of speakers, not who placed them [which is] the more appropriate focus... "The President was shot" emphasizes the importance of the person shot. (American Psychological Association, 42)

Finkelstein's Input—When the Subject Is Unimportant or Obvious

According to Finkelstein, the passive voice "allows [people] to hide responsibility for their actions" (235). He continues on, discussing when it's good to use:

Passive voice does have its place in technical writing. It can be useful when the subject of the sentence is unimportant or obvious, or when the object of the sentence is the primary focus. Passive voice can also be a useful way to breaking the pattern of sentence structure to keep the reader from falling asleep. (Finkelstein, 235)

Beer and McMurrey's Input—When What's Being Done Is More Important Than Who's Doing It

Beer and McMurrey present additional cases where the passive voice is okay to use:

Not every use of the passive is inadvisable...Sometimes it will give variety to your writing, and passive verbs can always be used if the doer of an action is unknown or unimportant, or if what is being done is simply more important than the doer:

Electricity was discovered thousands of years ago.

The bridge was torn down in 1992.

The contaminated material is then taken to a safe environment. (Beer and McMurrey, 53)

Works Cited

- American Psychological Association. 2001. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 5th. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Beer, David, and David McMurrey. 1997. *A Guide to Writing as an Engineer*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Finkelstein, Leo Jr. 2005. *Pocket Book of Technical Writing for Engineering and Scientists*. 2nd. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Murdick, William, and Jonathan C. Bloemker. 2001. *The Portable Technical Writer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.