



# Active vs. Passive Voice

One of the most common suggestions professors give to student writers is, “Avoid the passive voice!” There are several reasons for avoiding the passive voice; the active voice makes your writing more forceful and interesting, whereas the passive voice can seriously hinder the concision of your paper. Knowing what the passive voice is, and when to use it, is a helpful skill for writers.

**Active Voice** is “one of the two ‘voices’ of verbs. When the verb of a sentence is in the **active voice**, the subject is doing the acting.”

- “Richard fired Archie.”  
*Subject | action | recipient.*

“A verb is in the **passive voice** when the subject of the sentence is acted on by the verb.”

- “Archie was fired by Richard.”  
*Subject | action | initiator.*

If you change the sentence slightly, the ‘initiator,’ Richard, can disappear altogether, so that readers don’t know who is responsible for the action (this may or may not be a good thing).

- “Archie was fired.”  
*Recipient | action | (no initiator).*

## **Complex Examples:**

- “In 1973, President Nixon fired Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who was close to indicting the President.”
  - We can clearly see who did the firing in this sentence—Nixon. **That’s active voice.**
- “In 1973, Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who was close to indicting the President, was fired by President Nixon.”
  - Here Nixon has moved away from the center of the action, and the subject of the sentence (Cox) seems somehow more responsible for the firing because the sentence grammar focuses our attention on him.

Now compare this passive version, which deletes the responsibility altogether:

- “In 1973, Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox, who was close to indicting the President, was fired.”

Whose fault was the firing? Nixon has disappeared, so no one is present in the sentence to take responsibility for this action. Passive voice not only makes the sentence longer, it dilutes the meaning and hides the true initiator of the action from the readers’ eyes.

**There are some exceptions to the “Avoid Passives” rule.** Writers in the natural and social sciences choose passive when they want to put their emphasis on the results of an experiment or an observation, or the outcome of an historical event.

- “These phenomena were observed in seventy-one of ninety-three subjects.”  
*Recipient (observer not named; implication is that any observer would see the same thing.)*
- “When the ballots were counted, Kennedy’s margin of victory was the narrowest in history.”  
*Recipient (identity of counter isn’t important.)*

And there are a few common phrases that always use the passive, like this one.

- “Elvis Presley was born in 1935.”  
*Recipient (Mrs. Presley did the work, but she isn’t important in this sentence.)*