

### 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 flow of your paper. Knowing what the passive voice is, and when to use it, is a helpful skill for writers.

When we write in **active** voice, we connect the subject of the sentence with the action it is initiating. That means that readers can clearly see who is responsible for the action in a sentence.

“Richard fired Archie.”  
*Initiator/ action/ recipient.*

That’s the active voice: the subject *initiates* an action that affects the recipient.

In **passive** voice, the recipient becomes the subject, and the initiator of the action sneaks away to the prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence. Now all the attention is on the recipient, who becomes the grammatical subject.

“Archie was fired by Richard.”  
*Recipient/ action/ initiator.*

If you change the sentence slightly, the initiator 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).*

These are simple sentences, but you can use passive and active voice in more complex constructions.

“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.

Now compare the passive version:

“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? Only one name is mentioned—Cox. 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.

Of course, 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 observe would see the same phenomena.)*

“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.)*

Most professors want students to avoid the thoughtless passive—the one that slips in without conscious choice. It weakens a piece of writing, disrupts the flow, and increases the length of the sentence by as much as forty percent—all of which make the writing less interesting to a reader. So take the time to use your passives carefully if you want your writing to have energy!