



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Active and Passive Voice

English verbs have two voices: active and passive.

- In active voice, the subject of the sentence is **doing** the action of the verb.
 - *The student writes a paper.*
 - *I made mistakes.*
- In passive voice, the subject of the sentence is **acted upon**. Sometimes passive voice sentences include a prepositional phrase which expresses the **agent** (who or what is doing the action), but it does not need one in order to be grammatically complete.
 - *A paper is written (by the student).*
 - *Mistakes were made (by me).*

In general, readers of English tend to prefer active voice sentences, and these should make up the bulk of your writing. However, passive voice is not incorrect, and can sometimes be very effective; in fact, it's common in some academic disciplines, especially the sciences.

Active voice should especially be used when you wish to place emphasis on the **doer** of an action, or when that person or thing is important, or not obvious.

- *I reviewed the literature.* This version of the sentence highlights the person who did the action, and appropriately gives them the responsibility and credit for the action.

Passive voice may be a good fit if the **doer** of the action is obvious or unimportant, or you wish to place particular focus on who or what is **acted upon**.

- *The samples were collected on the second day.* As readers, we can most likely assume that the person collecting the samples is one of the researchers performing the experiment; the focus is not on the person doing the collecting, but on the samples.