

Passive Voice: What It Is and How to Avoid It

What is the passive voice? Passive voice is a stylistic choice when a sentence is written so that the object (the thing that the action is being done to) becomes the subject of the sentence (the doer of the action).

Passive Voice: *Netflix was watched all day by Sophie.*

Active Voice: *Sophie watched Netflix all day.*

This sentence in the active voice is clearer because Sophie, the person who is watching, is the subject, and Netflix, which is being watched, is the object of the sentence.

Why is avoiding passive voice important? The passive voice is usually avoided in an academic setting. One reason is for the sake of clarity: in a sentence written in passive voice, it is often unclear who or what is doing the action of the sentence. Writing in the active voice makes a sentence more direct. A more comprehensive reason to avoid passive voice is that it is always important to identify the “who” of a situation. If the people involved in the action are not clearly called out as such in the sentence, they are not receiving proper credit for their actions. Active voice helps writers avoid this problem because the doer of the action is clearly and directly stated.

Example Sentences for Different Subjects:

History

Passive: *The sale and distribution of alcohol **was outlawed by** the National Prohibition Act.*

Active: *The National Prohibition Act **outlawed** the sale and distribution of alcohol.*

Philosophy

Passive: *After **the conversation about justice** ended, the next **discussion was about** an ideal city.*

Active: *After **Socrates refuted Thrasymachus’** opinions about justice, **he began a discussion** about an ideal city.*

Theology

Passive: ***Reading this essay reminded me** of our class discussion about faith.*

Active: ***When I read this essay, I was reminded** of our class discussion about faith.*

Business Core

Passive: *Product A **was preferred by** both men and women, as shown by focus groups.*

Active: *Focus groups show that both men and women **prefer** Product A.*

English

Passive: *The green light **is used by** Fitzgerald as a symbol of Gatsby’s longing for Daisy.*

Active: *Fitzgerald **uses** the green light as a symbol of Gatsby’s longing for Daisy.*