

EMPHASIZE! ENERGIZE! USE ACTIVE VOICE!

Active voice makes sentences more concise and, in general, more interesting! Would you watch an action film that has no action? Similarly, in most writing situations, active verbs paired with specific subjects engage readers more than passive verbs such as forms of “to be” verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) that are not used to describe or rename the subject. However, passive voice is often used in science and technical writing, which strives to be objective. In effect, passive voice puts rhetorical distance between the writer and their subject in order to remove possible bias.

ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE VOICE

PASSIVE VOICE	When a sentence is in passive voice, the subject of the sentence <i>receives</i> the action.	EXAMPLE: <i>The road was crossed by the chicken.</i> In this sentence, the subject (the road) is passive. It does nothing. It receives the crossing.
ACTIVE VOICE	When a sentence uses active voice, the subject <i>does</i> the action described in the sentence.	EXAMPLE: <i>The chicken crossed the road.</i> Our focus is on the action (a chicken crossing something) rather than the object of the sentence (the road). By using active voice, the writer has changed the focus of the sentence and, therefore, directed the reader’s attention down a more appropriate and exciting path.

POSSIBLE ROAD-BLOCKS TO ACTIVE VOICE

ROAD-BLOCK	EXAMPLE	SOLUTION
MISSING SUBJECT	<i>The woman in red was gossiped about.</i> Readers are left wondering who spread the gossip.	Add an actor and change the verb to an action: <i>Ann and Kim gossiped about the woman in red.</i> Now you’ve caught the readers’ interest!
OVERUSE OF “TO BE” VERBS (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been). Circle these words in your writing. See how many you can get rid of by replacing them with alternative verbs right after the “to be” verb or elsewhere in your sentence.	<i>The game was delayed by the storm.</i> “Delayed” describes the central action of the sentence. Why not cut it out?	<i>The storm delayed the game.</i> The storm is now emphasized because it is at the beginning of the sentence and because it is doing the action.

WHEN TO USE PASSIVE VOICE

Passive voice can be used effectively, depending on what you want to stress in your sentence:

EXAMPLE: *Annie Leibovitz has photographed celebrities since the 1970s.*

This sentence emphasizes the actor, Leibovitz, who performed the action (she took the photos).

EXAMPLE: *Since the 1970s, celebrities have been photographed by Annie Leibovitz.*

This version emphasizes the celebrities, who have received the action (they were photographed). If this sentence was intended for an article about celebrities getting photographed, passive voice would be more appropriate.

Passive voice is sometimes required, such as in technical writing, to achieve an objective tone and to eschew the first person:

EXAMPLE: The methods used in the study include primary and secondary research.

