

Where to Find Help on Campus

Consultants at the **Hamline University Writing Center**, located in the basement of Bush Library, are eager to help you with all stages of your writing. We will work with you whether you have just received an assignment and have no idea how to begin or you have a finished draft and want help with revisions.

You can make appointments online at WC Online. Simply follow the instructions at:

<http://rich37.com/hamline>

We look forward to seeing you!



The Writing Center
Hamline University
Bush Library, Lower Level
651-523-2026
writingcenter@hamline.edu

Active and Passive Voice



Perhaps a professor has handed a paper back to you with instructions written in red ink: “Avoid passive voice!”

But what does that mean?

The active voice and the passive voice are two different grammatical ways of structuring a sentence. **Active voice** uses an **active verb** structure; that is, the verb shows what the “doer” of the sentence is doing. For example:

My professor prefers active voice.

In this sentence, “my professor” is the subject, and he or she is “preferring” active voice.

Passive voice uses a **passive verb** structure; that is, it tells what is being done to the subject of the sentence.

Active voice is preferred by my professor.

In this sentence, “active voice” is the subject, and it is “being preferred” by the professor.

Active versus Passive

Notice the tone in the two sample sentences so far. *My professor prefers active voice* has a clarity that the second sentence lacks. That’s because the subject *my professor* is more concrete; you can picture a professor, and you can quickly grasp the notion that he or she prefers something. In the second sentence, the subject *active voice* is abstract, and until you reach the end of the sentence, you don’t know who’s doing the preferring. That delay creates a momentary confusion your mind.

Here are a few more examples of active voice and passive voice. Can you tell which is which?

- *George Orwell wrote Animal Farm.*
- *Animal Farm was written by George Orwell.*

- *We conducted the experiment yesterday.*
- *The experiment was conducted yesterday.*

Identifying Passive Voice in Your Own Writing

Consultants at Hamline’s Writing Center can help you find and change instances of passive voice in your papers. Eventually, however, you must learn to do this on your own.

Begin by reading your paper one sentence at a time. At the end of each sentence, ask yourself, *Who or what is performing the action expressed in the verb?* Then make that thing or person the subject of the sentence.

The economic policies are being considered by Congress.

In this sentence, Congress is doing the considering, so make it the subject of the sentence.

Congress is considering the economic policies.

Correcting your writing in this way may seem tedious at first, but with practice you’ll find that you naturally write in active voice and won’t need to make many revisions.

When To Use Passive Voice

Most of the time, your writing will be clearer, more concise, and more lively if you stick to active voice. When you write papers in the humanities, documents at your workplace, or even emails to friends and coworkers, you’ll be better off writing in active voice.

Sometimes, however, passive voice can be useful. For example, writers in the sciences often use passive voice to emphasize the results of research without having to explain who did the research. In any type of writing, passive voice can be rhetorically effective, or even necessary. You can use passive voice when you don’t know who the

actor in the sentence is, or to connect the topics of two sentences.

Every year, thousands of people are diagnosed with cancer.

The pandas are rare. Two of them will be returned to the wild.

Accessing More Information

- The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>
- The Writing Center @ The University of Wisconsin – Madison: www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook
- Raimes, Ann. *Keys for Writers*. 5th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. You can find this book at the Hamline bookstore; any edition will provide information on active and passive voice.
- Hacker, Diana. *The Bedford Handbook*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998. Any edition of Bedford is fine.

Acknowledgments

Information from this brochure was adapted from: “Active and Passive Voice.” The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University. http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_actpass.html