

## ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

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You've probably all heard the "rule" that you should avoid using passive voice in your writing. Most likely, this is because excessive passive voice can bog down your writing, which is a trap that many new academic writers fall into. By trying to imitate what they believe academic writing should sound like, these writers end up twisting even the most simple sentences into passive voice, thinking it sounds smarter. Unfortunately, it often just sounds awkward. Passive voice, however, is sometimes the best choice. I'd like to amend the passive voice "rule" to say that you need to be aware of when you're using passive voice so you can make informed choices.

### WHICH IS WHICH?

An easy way to determine whether a verb is written in active or passive form is to ask "Who is doing what to whom?" In other words, you want to know if the grammatical subject of the sentence is the one performing the action described by the verb.

- a. Mary built the house in 1974.                      b. The house was built in 1974.

In the first sentence, Mary is the subject and Mary is doing the house building (the action described by the verb), so it's active. In the second one, the house is the subject, but it is not doing the building: passive tense.

Another way to think about this is to draw an arrow in the direction of action:

- a. Mary built the house in 1974.                      b. The house was built in 1974. (by Mary)

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If the arrow points in the same direction as the sentence (left to right), then the sentence is active. In the case of the second (passive) sentence, your eyes are reading one way, while your brain has to think in the opposite direction. Sometimes passive sentences can require the reader to do more "work," so sometimes the active sentence is a better choice.

### WHAT'S THE POINT?

The real question of which voice to use comes down to what's important in your sentence. Where do you want to focus your readers' attention? In this case, is it important to emphasize Mary or the house? As these handy illustrations show, the images called up by these two sentences are different:



- a. Mary built the house in 1974.                      b. The house was built in 1974.

One puts the emphasis on Mary, while the other emphasizes the house. So if you're writing an essay about Mary, active voice would probably be best. But if you're talking about the house, passive voice would work.

**PASSIVE VOICE AND EXCLUSIONARY LANGUAGE**

It's also important to think about how passive voice can unintentionally exclude people from your discussion and your audience. As we already saw with Mary and her house, if we put the sentence in passive voice, Mary disappears. If your goal is to persuade Mary to agree with your argument she might be angry, or worse, stop listening altogether. Also, the disappearance of Mary might be confusing to the reader, who wonders—who built the house? Did it build itself?

For example, history texts will often discuss how European immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life and expanded opportunities, but will note that “slaves were brought to America.” Not only does this omit the destruction of African societies and families, it sidesteps the role of northern merchants and southern slaveholders in the slave trade.

Another example might be the erasure of Chinese laborers when discussing the construction of the continental railroad by such a phrase as “the continental railroad was built,” which omits information about the laborers and the oppression they suffered (many were not working voluntarily).

To be fair, sometimes you need to skip over some information, or sometimes information isn't important so passive voice is preferred. However, often “who's doing what” is important (this is also referred to as the “agent” or “subject” of the sentence or action), so be sure to include that information.