

Active and Passive Voice

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Passive Voice

When a sentence is written in the passive voice, it can be unclear who or what is performing the action in the verb:

Data were analyzed as a split plot using SAS PROC MIXED.

The test was failed by more than half of the students.

In the first sentence, for example, who is analyzing the data? In the second sentence, the verb's subject (*the students*) is placed after the verb (*failed*).

While the passive voice has become conventional in scientific writing (often to convey objectivity), when you write Extension guides and circulars for a general audience, you should generally use the active voice.

Active Voice

Sentences in the active voice clearly show that the subject of the sentence is performing the action in the verb:

More than half of the students failed the test.

Salt adds flavor to breads.

Passive sentences often contain a form of the verb *be* (*is, are, was, were, etc.*) or the phrase *by the*. Look for these cues to help you spot the passive voice, and rewrite the sentence using an active verb (without also using a form of *be*) with a clear subject (the person/thing performing the action in the verb).

Using the Passive Voice Effectively

The passive voice can be useful from time to time, such as when

the subject of the verb is known or unimportant:

Add 1 cup of flour and mix well.

vs.

You add 1 cup of flour and mix well.

Or when you want to move the subject to the last part of the sentence for better continuity:

Style affects readers' comprehension. Readers may be distracted by inconsistent style. [passive]

Style affects readers' comprehension. Inconsistent style may distract readers. [active]

For more examples, see <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1/>