

PASSIVE VOICE USE IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

Many instructors in the sciences encourage student writers to use the passive voice in science writing. Because the passive voice avoids the first person (I, me, mine), it can allow the student writer and the professional science writer to create an objective tone in their papers in one of the sciences. The passive voice is also necessary when the doer of the action (the subject) is less important than the action itself or the result of the action.

Examples:

A number of important considerations are indicated by these results.
Experiments were set up to explore the implications of the findings.
Velocity concerns were met by the design of the chute.
The use of the batteries will be desired as an example and educational vehicle.

Passive Voice Explained:

1. THE SUBJECT IS RECEIVER OF THE ACTION.

Active voice: the subject performs the verb's action.

Example: Mary ate a pear. (Mary does the eating.)

Passive voice: the subject receives the action of the verb. The actor is either added after the preposition "by" or is not stated.

Example: A pear was eaten by Mary.
A pear was eaten.

2. THERE ARE ALWAYS TWO VERBS.

Passive voice always uses two verbs—a form of the verb "to be" (for example, is, are, was, were, am) and a past participle. Past participles usually end in -ed, -en, or an irregular ending.

<u>Helping verb</u>	<u>Past participle</u>
was	stopped
is	taken
were	told
are	won
had been	shown
will have been	eaten

Examples: It was eaten by me.
The floor was swept by Mary.
The game was won by the other team.
The man was killed by the car.
The book is being read by Francis.
The cookie is being eaten by the baby.
The men were attacked.
The factory was shut down.
The building was burned to the ground.

3. THE ACTOR IS ADDED TO THE END OF THE SENTENCE WITH THE PREPOSITION "BY" (PRESENT OR IMPLIED)

HOW TO TEST FOR PASSIVE VOICE

1. Find the verb or verb phrase. Is there a form of "to be" plus a past participle?

Note: Not every sentence that contains a form of "have" or "be" is passive. Forms of "have" can do several things in English. For example, in "Maria has to prepare the experiment," "has" is not part of a past-tense verb. It's a modal verb, like "must," "can," or "may." Modal verbs tell how necessary it is to do something (compare "Maria has to prepare" versus "Maria may prepare"). And forms of "be" are not always passive, either. "Be" can be the main verb of a sentence that describes a state of being rather than an action. For example, in the sentence "Wen Ju is a good student," the verb ("is") is not passive; "is" simply describes Wen Ju's state of being. In other words, don't assume that any time you see a form of "have" and a form of "to be" together, you are looking at a passive sentence.

2. Find the subject of the sentence. Does the subject receive, not perform, the action of the verb?

3. Is the actor added to the end of the sentence after the preposition "by?" If the actor is not stated, choose a noun that could be the actor and test it at the end of the sentence after "by."

For additional practice at recognizing the passive voice, write the following sentences in the passive voice.

1. The man fixed the leak.
2. Lightning struck the house.
3. The boy climbed the ladder so that he could get a better view of the roof.
4. The campers cleaned the bunkhouse so that their counselor would give them a star.
5. Yesterday, after we had eaten dinner, we played basketball in the park.

ANSWERS:

1. The leak was fixed by the men.
2. The house was struck by lightning.
3. The ladder was climbed by the boy so that he could get a better view of the roof.
4. The bunkhouse was cleaned by the campers so that their counselor would give them a star.
5. Yesterday, after dinner was eaten by us, basketball was played by us in the park.

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