

# INSTITUTE WRITING PROGRAM

## THE WRITING CENTER

### Passive and Active Voice

Many writers have a sense that they “shouldn't use the passive voice,” but fewer writers have a good sense of what we mean by “active” and “passive voice.” Like tense (the time of the action relative to the present moment) and aspect (the duration of the action), **the term “voice” is used to explain or describe the action of a verb.**

#### What is the passive voice?

**Voice** describes the relationship between the grammatical subject of the sentence and the verb. If a subject **performs the action**, the voice of the verb is **active**:

Jack ate the cake. (“Jack” is the grammatical subject of the sentence and is performing the action.)

If the subject **receives the action**, the voice is **passive**:

The cake was eaten by Jack. (Jack is performing the action, but “The cake” is the grammatical subject of the sentence.)

It does not matter whether or not the subject is receiving the action semantically, only grammatically: “Jack received a prize” is in the active voice because the subject, “Jack,” performs the action “receive,” even though the person Jack receives rather than gives the prize. On the other hand, “Jack was given a prize” is in the passive voice because Jack (the subject of the sentence) does not perform the action “give.”

Also note that voice has nothing to do with how “active” the action described by a verb is: very “active” actions can be in the passive voice, and very “passive” actions can be in the active voice.

Jack lay motionless in the hotel room. (“passive” verb in the active voice)

The hotel room was demolished by Jack. (“active” verb in the passive voice)

#### Avoiding the passive voice

Because it grammatically displaces the subject of the sentence (“The cake was eaten by Jack” or even “The cake was eaten”), **the passive voice tends to impair clarity**. This is not always a bad thing; if you want to deflect blame, for instance, you would rather say “Mistakes were made” than “I made a mistake” or even “We all made mistakes.” If you are trying to write a clear analysis, that ambiguity will hurt your argument. **The passive voice also tends to be unnecessarily verbose** because it requires an auxiliary verb and can require additional prepositions. It takes only four words to say, “Jack ate the cake,” while “The cake was eaten by Jack” takes six words to express the same thought.

**Most passive voice sentences can be changed into the active voice by turning the subject of the passive construction into a direct object.** Direct objects always receive the action of a transitive verb, so if a subject is receiving the action of a verb, you should be able to switch it into the direct object of an active-voice sentence (notice in the example above how “cake” changes from the subject to the direct object). You may or may not need to go hunting for the subject of your revised active sentence.



## Revising passive voice sentences

If the passive construction uses a preposition to indicate who performs the action (i.e. “by Jack”), then the object of the preposition becomes the subject.

**Passive voice:** The ball was kicked by Tom.

**Active voice:** Tom kicked the ball.

If the passive construction hides the actor (“Mistakes were made”), then you will need to provide the subject.

**Passive voice:** The money was stolen. (In this example, we don’t know who stole the money.)

**To make this sentence active, you will have to identify the subject:**

I stole the money.

A masked bandit stole the money.

We don’t know who stole the money.

Somebody stole the money.

Notice that you can retain the ambiguity of the subject while still using the active voice (“Somebody stole the money”), or you can explicitly note the lack of an actor (“We don’t know who stole the money”). In either case, the evasion is more obvious.

## Using the passive voice

**Some disciplines and/or instructors have specific guidelines for using or not using the passive voice.** Most humanities disciplines recommend writing exclusively in the active voice, but some disciplines make targeted use of the passive voice.

For instance, while most guides to business writing encourage you to write in the active voice, some manuals recommend using the passive voice to deliver bad news to clients.

Unfortunately, your life savings was lost in the recent market crash.

Many scientific disciplines are currently debating whether writers should use the passive voice and, if so, where it is appropriate. Passive voice is most commonly allowed or encouraged in the Materials and Methods section of IMRaD form.

The solution was titrated with a 0.100 molar NaOH solution.

If you are uncertain about the requirements for your project, check with your instructor (or the editorial policy of the publication venue you are addressing). If your writing project requires the passive voice, you should be especially vigilant about writing clearly and concisely.