

# Passive Voice

Strictly speaking, Passive Voice (PV) isn't grammatically *wrong* (though we all know Microsoft Word loves to underline PV sentences with a wiggly green line). In most academic disciplines (and according to the APA manual), however, PV is considered stylistically inferior to active voice.

What is the actual difference between PV and active sentences? A basic definition (using as few confusing grammar terms as possible) is that PV sentences emphasize who or what receives the action of the verb, and de-emphasize the subject (the person/thing actually doing the action). \*One method that often works to identify a PV sentence is to locate the word *by* in a sentence.

## Active

Monica doesn't like low-fat mayonnaise.  
Sylvia is writing crazy, fratricidal poems.  
Joey likes jam.  
Thomas will work on the light bulb.

## Passive

Low-fat mayonnaise isn't liked (by Monica)  
Crazy, fratricidal poems are being written.  
Jam is liked (by Joey).  
The light bulb will be worked on (by Thomas).

On page 77 of the *APA Publication Manual*, Sixth Edition, (the first page of the "Style & Usage" section) you will see this:

### **Preferred Active Voice**

Preferred: "We conducted the survey in a controlled setting."

Nonpreferred: "The survey was conducted in a controlled setting."

Passive voice is formed by a conjugation of "to be" (is, am, are, was, were, been, be, being) + a past participle (basically a past tense verb).

e.g. *is liked; are being written; will be worked on*

Occasionally, passive voice can help to avoid "blaming" someone for a failure:

*Mistakes were made.* (Compare with "Judge Lance Ito made mistakes." Notice how the passive version of this sentence conveniently hides the name of the person who made the mistakes.) PV can be an effective style when you want to don't want to assign blame.

For the most part, however, writers should avoid passive voice whenever possible. When you find yourself writing in the passive voice, try to emphasize the person/thing doing the action. Usually placing the subject FIRST and the verb SECOND will help change PV to active voice.

*Practice changing the following passive voice sentences to active voice (or vice-versa):*

1. PV, however, is considered stylistically inferior to active voice by the APA manual.
2. Contributing factors to self-perception of multi-racial identity are not explored in the article.
3. Destiny Hope changed her name to "Miley Cyrus."
4. Mrs. Jackson was alarmed by her son's rapidly disappearing nose.

5. Schizoaffective Disorder must be taken into consideration as a possible diagnosis.

Answers:

1. The APA manual, however considers PV stylistically inferior to active voice.
2. The article does not explore contributing factors to self-perception of multi-racial identity.
3. Her name was changed to "Miley Cyrus" by Destiny Hope.
4. Her son's rapidly disappearing nose alarmed Mrs. Jackson.
5. [The therapist] must take into consideration Schizoaffective Disorder as a possible diagnosis.

## Grammatical Person

1 <sup>st</sup> person: I, we.	(e.g. I will watch <i>Modern Family</i> tonight.)
2 <sup>nd</sup> person You	(e.g. You will watch <i>Modern Family</i> tonight.)
3 <sup>rd</sup> person: He, she, they, (specific name).	(e.g. He will watch <i>Modern Family</i> tonight.)

A key reason that many students use passive voice is to remove first person (I/me, We/us) from a sentence.

Compare the following:

Active: I found better memory retention when students participated actively in discussion.

Passive: Better memory retention was found when students participated actively in discussion.

Recall that pg. 77 of the *Publication Manual*, "We conducted" is preferred to "The survey was conducted."

This point is clarified on p. 69 (section 3.09):

"To avoid ambiguity, use a personal pronoun rather than the third person when describing steps taken in your experiment.

Correct: We reviewed the literature.

Incorrect: The authors reviewed the literature."

Unless otherwise specified in a class syllabus or assignment directions, Rossier allows both first person and third person for all paper. (Second person "you" is not acceptable.) The key is to select one grammatical person (do not to switch haphazardly between the two), and be consistent. It is important to *think* about which "person" makes the most sense for a given assignment.

In a literature review, using first person can sound too informal and can become grating to a reader. For example, compare the two following sentences

*As I reviewed the literature on self-perception of multi-racial identity, I noticed that the question of what contributes to racial self-identification is absent. In my opinion, more research is needed on this topic.*

*In the literature on self-perception of multi-racial identity largely ignores the question of what contributes to racial self-identification; more research is needed on this topic.*

Similarly, for a personal reflection, using third person sounds completely unnatural and slightly bizarre. Compare the following:

*When one was in high school, one's Algebra teacher gave one plenty of encouragement.*

*Consequently, one developed self-confidence and one believed that one could succeed in school.*

*When I was in high school, my Algebra teacher gave me plenty of encouragement. Consequently, I developed self-confidence and believed that I could succeed in school.*

Remember that it's important to *think* about which grammatical person makes the most sense for the type of assignment you're writing.