

Basic Tips for Using the Active Voice

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Many professors in various fields such as English and the sciences usually prefer students to use the active voice. It provides a concise tone that strengthens the writer's work and eliminates extra words that can clutter ideas. The passive voice does serve its purpose in academics every now and then, but the active voice tends to maintain popularity.

According to Diana Hacker, the main rule for using the active voice is to "choose an active verb and pair it with a subject that names the person or thing doing the action" (231). When you do this, the subject directly performs the action which creates a stronger and more concise sentence.

Active Voice: The **police** (subject) **chased** (verb) the suspect.

The passive voice usually emerges when you use the verb "**be**" and its other forms such as "**am**," "**is**," "**are**," "**was**," "**were**," and so on. When using these verbs, the word "**by**" normally accompanies them which adds extra words to your sentences. When this happens, "the action is performed upon the subject" (Purdue OWL).

Passive Voice: The suspect **was** chased (verb) **by** the police (subject).

Also, the verb "be" may function as a **helping verb** which can separate the subject from its main verb.

Passive Voice: **Carol** (subject) **was** (helping verb) able to **get** (verb) her bachelor's degree.

When using the active voice, **avoid "be"** and **try incorporating active verbs** into your sentences.

Passive Voice: Carol **was able** to get her bachelor's degree.

Active Voice: Carol **acquired** her bachelor's degree.

One note to consider is that the presence of any form of "be" doesn't always mean that the sentence is passive. Certain instances require a form of "be" in order to properly convey the meaning of a statement. You can use it when applying a specific title to a person ("Oliver is a manager at the security firm") or giving a description to a subject ("Cal State East Bay is a large campus").

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Take a look at a sample passage from a student's essay that contains instances of the passive voice:

While amendments are waiting to pass, language discrimination in the workplace cases are increasing. Employees have gone to court regarding policies to speak only English. There are several legal cases that mention how employers want to be able to understand what the employees are talking about. Some employer would like employee to speak English especially when they are not helping non-English speaking customers.

Observe this suggested revision to the active voice of the same passage:

While amendments await approval, cases of language discrimination in the workplace continue to increase. Employees have gone to court regarding policies to speak only English. Several legal cases mention that employers desire to understand what the employees discuss. Some employers would like employees to speak English, especially when not helping non-English speaking customers.

As with any skill, using the active voice takes practice. Try revising the passive voice into the active voice within your own writing. You'll notice a clear difference in its strength when doing so.

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Reference: The following works were referred to during the creation of this handout: *Purdue OWL: MLA Formatting and Style Guide* and *The Bedford Handbook* by Diana Hacker.