

# *The Portable Editor*

## Tips for Improving Your Writing

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### **Passive Voice**

Although *passive voice* is not grammatically incorrect, the structure can often complicate your sentences, making them wordy and unclear. *Active voice* enables readers to more clearly understand what you're communicating because you are stating it directly. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in a *verb* as opposed to passive voice, in which the action is performed upon the sentence *subject*. Furthermore, sentences in active voice are more concise because it takes fewer words to express the action. This tip sheet includes information on distinguishing passive voice from active voice. The information can be found at the UNC Writing Center at [www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/](http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/) and The OWL at Purdue at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.

Computer grammar-checking programs do not usually catch all passive voice constructions, so it's important to recognize what passive and active constructions look like.

#### **First, consider the chicken and the road.**

You know the joke: *Why was the road crossed by the chicken?* Or perhaps you're more familiar with this version: *Why did the chicken cross the road?*

The first example is written in passive voice. Although the chicken performed the action, it is not in the traditional subject spot; the road, in this case, is the grammatical subject. Remember, subjects are generally the "actors" and use active verbs to express the "doing" in your sentences, whether it involves crossing roads, proposing ideas, or making arguments.

#### **Here's another example:**

*Passive:* The questions for the final exam on the "History of Oppression" were selected by Professor Carlton-LeNay.

*Active:* Professor Carlton-LeNay selected the questions for the final exam on the "History of Oppression."

#### **Other ways to identify passive voice:**

Look for a form of "to be" (*is, are, am, was, were, has been, have been, had been, will be, will have been, being*) followed by a past participle. (The past participle is a form of the verb that typically, but not always, ends in *-ed*.)

#### **For example:**

*Passive:* School of Social Work faculty members were praised for their efforts in reforming mental health care in the state.

In the above sentence, it's unclear who or what was praising the faculty members.

*Active:* North Carolina lawmakers praised School of Social Work faculty members for their efforts in reforming mental health care in the state.

In this example, it is clear that lawmakers (subject) are the "actors" in the sentence who praised (verb) faculty members (object).

### **When passive may be OK:**

The previous example is also a little tricky. Both sentence constructions are grammatically correct. But, depending upon the context, the writer may want to use a passive construction to emphasize that the object of the action (in this case, faculty members) may be more important than who is responsible for the action (lawmakers). Thus, the sentence could be rewritten as follows: *School of Social Work faculty members were praised by North Carolina lawmakers for the educators' efforts in reforming mental health care in the state.* \*Note the word **educators** makes clear whose efforts were praised as opposed to saying, "their efforts."

**Research reports:** Many instructors prefer that you remove personal "I" statements from your research to ensure that your work is presented with an objective tone.

*Active:* I obtained data from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services to supplement the findings from the survey analysis.

*Passive but possibly preferred:* To supplement the findings from the survey analysis, data were obtained from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

Still, in some cases, you can use active constructions and retain your objectivity. Examples: support, indicate, suggest, correspond, challenge, yield, and show.

Instead of writing: *A number of things are indicated by these results.*

Consider: *These results indicate a number of things.*

or *Further analysis showed/suggested/yielded...*

Ultimately, check with your instructors for their preferences regarding use of the passive construction.

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