

## Active vs. Passive Voice

by Brian Stakes

Action verbs can have two *voices*, **active** (*i.e.* turned) or **passive** (*i.e.* is turned). The **voice** of a verb **tells you whether the subject of the sentence is completing an action or if an action is being done to the subject.**

### Active Voice

In a sentence with an active voice verb, the subject is the agent of the sentence and completes an action.

- The boy (agent) turned (action) on the light.

### Passive Voice

In a sentence with the passive voice, the subject is acted upon by the agent.

- The light was turned on (action) by the boy (agent).
- The light was turned on (action). (no agent).

### Choosing Active Voice

Use the active voice when you want to emphasize the subject as the agent of the action. Also, active voice verbs engage the reader with their livelier tone and are **less wordy** than passive verbs.

- Active
  - Clearly, globalization (agent) already affects (action) the economy and the gap between the rich and the poor.
- Passive
  - Clearly, the economy and the gap between the rich and the poor are affected (action) by globalization (agent).

### Choosing Passive Voice

As a general rule, avoid using the passive voice. The passive voice takes away from the liveliness of your writing and can make it seem flat. However, there are some instances when the passive voice is a better choice:

- **When you want to call attention to the receiver of the action instead of the performer.**
  - Passive
    - Restrictions on foreign investment were removed (action) and tariffs were eliminated (action) on imported goods. (no agent)

- Active
  - Governments (agent) removed (action) restrictions on foreign investment and eliminated (action) tariffs on imported goods.
- **When the performer of the action is not known, or not important**
  - Passive
    - In the era of globalization, world wide standards for workplace safety, wages, and environmental protection are (action) set. (no agent)
- **When you want to avoid calling attention to the performer of an action**
  - Passive
    - Land is given (action) to the private sector so that corporations can develop it. (no agent)
  - Active
    - The government (agent) gives (action) land to the private sector so that corporations can develop it.
- **When you want your writing to appear objective (i.e. lab reports)**
  - Passive
    - One sixth the amount of energy is consumed (action) by passengers (agent) on trains.
  - Active
    - Passengers (agent) on trains consume (action) one sixth the amount of energy as a car with no passengers.

### Active Verbs in Reports

The following two paragraphs show that objective reports can use active verbs while keeping the same emphasis. Sometimes, the writer can keep the same subject and emphasis by choosing a different verb.

### Passive Paragraph

Data **were collected** at the intersection on October 14 and 21, 2004 between 4-6 p.m. Two stop watches and a 100' tape **were used**. First, a detection zone **was laid** out by measuring 60-ft upstream from the stop line at the intersection. The 60-ft detection zone is approximately equal to three car lengths. The stopwatches **were started** at the beginning of the green light. Vehicles **were** then **timed** when they crossed the line A-A and B-B as shown in Figure 1.

### **Active Paragraph**

Data collection **occurred** on October 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> between 4-6pm. The equipment **included** two stop watches and a 100-foot tape. The detection zone extended 60-ft, or three car lengths, upstream from the stop line at the intersection. As Figure 1 **shows**, the timing **began** at the start of the green light and **concluded** when the vehicles crossed lines A-A and B-B.