Using active and passive when reporting evidence

When we write, we make a number of choices about verb forms. One of the choices we make is to use either the [**active**](https://canvas.sydney.edu.au/courses/12076/pages/Glossary#active) or [**passive**](https://canvas.sydney.edu.au/courses/12076/pages/Glossary#passive) voice.

If we choose the active voice when reporting evidence, we commit ourselves to identifying the doer, sayer or thinker (i.e. the actor) of the action, statement, thoughts or beliefs.

**O'Carroll** (2017) recently pointed out that language development is faster when the child learns from more than one source..

This means that, when we report evidence, the source of the information or evidence is identifiable, and we are committed to naming and referencing that source. However, there are some good reasons for using the passive form to omit the actor from your writing.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Reason** | **Example** | **Explanation** |
| 1. There is only one likely actor in the particular context. | **She was awarded** an Emeritus professorship. | There is really only one likely actor here - her University - so it is not necessary to identify it specifically. |
| 2. The actor has been stated before, usually very recently, and continues to be implied. | The researchers identified a new behaviour variant in their experiments. **It was found** that... | The actor can be left out in the second sentence since it is clear from the first sentence that a group pf researchers carried out the experiment, and that, logically, it was those researchers who found the results. |
| 3. You wish to maintain the reader's focus on a particular concept or [theme](https://writesite.elearn.usyd.edu.au/m2/m2u4/m2u4s4/m2u4s4_5_3.htm) | Rocks were originally used to carry carved or painted messages. Scrolled leather was used in later times (Benson, 2015), before the advent of heavy parchment which was written on in fine inks and illuminated with costly decorations (Hardy, 2014). | The writer has chosen to focus the reader's attention on the media of communication (*rocks*, *scrolled leather,* *heavy parchment* and *books*) and has therefore placed these in theme position at the front of each sentence or clause and has used the passive form of the verb. Notice that the actors have been omitted, but the writer has still acknowledged the sources of her information.  The writer could have used active voice, saying "*Benson (2015) showed that* ... *Hardy' s (2014) research established that ...*" if they wanted to focus the reader's attention on the doer of the actions - in this case, the authors of the research. |

The impersonal passive

The impersonal passive is widely used in academic writing and has two components: it + a verb in the passive voice. It is commonly used with [**primary tenses**](https://canvas.sydney.edu.au/courses/12076/pages/Glossary#pri_tense) but can also be used with most [**secondary tenses**](https://canvas.sydney.edu.au/courses/12076/pages/Glossary#sec_tense) as well as the modal auxiliaries.

Examples:

**It is generally thought** that Tasmania was discovered by the Dutch.

**It has been noted** that language development is faster when the child learns from more than one source.

**It might be argued** that the longbow was responsible for the English victory at Agincourt.

You should always have a reason for using the impersonal passive form. You should never be using it to avoid giving your sources and correctly referencing them.

The following are three common reasons for using the impersonal passive form in academic writing:

1. To express a speculative thought or opinion of your own - often a suggestion or conclusion.

Other ways of making speculative or suggestions or drawing tentative conclusions include:

*It is suggested that ...*

*It could be suggested that ...*

*It might be thought that ...*

*It could be said that ...*

*It may be hypothesised that ...*

*It might be claimed that ...*

*It could be assumed that ...*

Note: These structures often use modal verbs to indicate tentativeness.

2. To indicate distance from (i.e. limited endorsement or non-endorsement of) the views being presented.

Other language for distancing yourself from information you present includes:

*It has been argued that ...*

*It was claimed that ...*

*It has been hypothesised that ...*

*It has been said that ...*

*It was assumed that ...*

3. To avoid personalised language, particularly in introductions and conclusions.

Potential problems when using the passive voice

There are some potential problems with using the passive to report evidence:

1.

You may be tempted to see the correct referencing of the source as optional. After all, if you have not said who stated or found or suggested something, why reference it? If you continually omit reference to your sources, your writing will be seen as poorly researched and argued. It will not conform to the expectations of the Western academic tradition.

Example:

The findings of previous research **have recently been called into question.**

If you don't identify your sources, your reader may assume that:

* + what you are presenting is no more than personal opinion.
  + your writing is poorly researched.
  + you have not understood what you have read.
  + your position is poorly argued and supported.
  + you are unsure of the authenticity or reliability of your sources (for further information on this, go to Module 2, Unit 2: Evaluating your sources).
  + you are deliberately trying to mislead the reader by introducing unresearched material.

2.

If you overuse the passive form, it will be very difficult for your reader to detect **your** 'voice' in your writing. Your reader will not know what your position is as opposed to the positions taken by your sources. This is especially so if you overuse the impersonal passive form beginning with it.

Example:

**It is generally accepted** that these theories have now been superseded.

If the reader cannot see what you think about the evidence you are presenting or reporting, they are unlikely to be convinced by it either.

Your reader will probably be confused, as they may not be able to detect:

* + who did, said, found or thought what.
  + the degree to which you endorse the evidence you present.

They will not know where you stand because you have given them so little to 'hang onto' to help them interpret your meaning and share in your argument

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<https://canvas.sydney.edu.au/courses/12076/pages/strategy-5-using-passive-constructions> viewed 4/8/21

**Primary tense --**

Primary tense indicates whether the things you are writing about:

* happen at the time of writing (e.g. they may be generally true or are habitual occurrences) (present)
* happened in the past (past)
* will happen in the future (future).

If you are simply interested in the fact that a something happened / happens / will happen, then you use the simple past, present, or future.

Simple past: 'They *left* the mosque at half past nine.'

Simple present: 'Do you *eat* rice often?' / 'Santa *comes* on Christmas Eve.'

Simple future: 'The new teacher *will arrive* in a week or so.'

**Secondary tense --**

Secondary tense (sometimes called 'aspect') focuses on the duration and/or completion of the event rather than simply locating the event in time (primary tense). If the continuous is used (be + the present participle) the writer is focussing on the extent of time over which the event is happening. If the perfect is used (have + the past participle) the writer considers the event to have been completed.

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