

Sentences: Active/passive voice and nominalisation

Sentences can be written in a number of different ways to create language that ranges in style from **informal** to very **formal**. What you choose to do with the 'doers' and 'receivers' of the action of the verb in your sentence can create different effects. You need to know how to use:

1. Active voice (formal, subject of the sentence DOES the action)
2. Passive voice (formal, subject of the sentence RECEIVES or IS AFFECTED BY the action)
3. Nominalisation (very formal; verbs, adjectives, adverbs become noun forms)
4. The "correct" style (different DISCIPLINES, different styles)



GRAMMAR CHECKERS can assist you with **active and passive voice** because they signal passive verbs using green underlining. You, the writer, has to decide whether you want your sentences to be in active or passive voice. If passive verbs are signalled and you are wishing to write in active voice, then you can rewrite your sentence.

1. Active voice

Most writing guides recommend that you use active voice constructions because sentences in this voice tend to be clear, precise and direct. Active voice also focuses the reader's attention on the responsible participant in the clause. However, different subjects and contexts have different preferences for active and passive clauses. In active voice, the **SUBJECT** of the sentence does the action.

Examples

- ✓ **Researchers** collected data on the behaviour of children.
DOER/SUBJECT ACTION VERB
- ✓ The **study** on the children reveals that food affects behaviour.
DOER/SUBJECT ACTION VERB
- ✓ The **education observers** argue that food affects behaviour.
DOER/SUBJECT ACTION VERB

2. Passive voice

In some cases, there may be a preference for passive voice so that the person **AFFECTED BY** the action comes first in the sentence. The reason for this is to shift the focus of a verb to the person affected by the action, and you may choose to omit the doer of the action.

Examples

- ✓ **Data** on behaviour of children was collected **(by researchers)**.
OBJECT OF THE RESEARCH PASSIVE VERB DOER AFTER VERB (may be omitted)
- ✓ The **effects of food** on children's behaviour were revealed.
OBJECT OF THE STUDY PASSIVE VERB (DOER OMITTED)
- ✓ **The effect of food on behaviour** was documented **(by the research team)**.
OBJECT OF THE STUDY PASSIVE VERB DOER AFTER VERB (may be omitted)

Converting sentences from passive to active voice

If you wish to concentrate on writing in clear simple sentences by using active voice, here are some tips for converting sentences from passive to active voice.

Tips

- ✓ Look for sentences that have 'by' (e.g. by researchers) and rewrite so the 'actor' is at the **BEGINNING** of the sentence.
- ✓ Ask yourself who the subject is. If the subject is not clear, consider words like 'researchers', 'studies', 'experts in this field'.

3. Nominalisation

If your study subject states a preference for **very formal, abstract**, academic writing, the technique of nominalisation (changing verbs to nouns) can be very helpful to make your writing more academic and concise. Nominalisation allows you to discuss more abstract concepts by taking the focus off the action and making the action into a concept or idea.

Example

- ✓ We **analysed** the data from the experiment, and it revealed that children **react** when they have too much sugar. (active voice)

REWRITTEN IN NOMINALISED FORM

- ✓ The **analysis** of the data revealed children's **reaction** to excessive sugar intake.
(NOMINALISED VERBS) (NOTE THAT THE SENTENCE IS SHORTER)

If you wish to concentrate on writing that is more formal and abstract by using nominalisation, here are some tips for **making actions into abstract nouns**.

Tips

- Step 1:** Read your writing and **highlight** any **personal pronouns** (e.g. I, you, we, they) because you are going to get rid of ALL personal references.
- Step 2:** Underline all of the **verb groups** that show the action of the sentence because you are going to change them into noun (nominalised) words or groups.
- Step 3:** Check your **vocabulary**. Change any words that may sound simple into words that are more technical (e.g. from the above example 'too much sugar' becomes 'excessive sugar') because you are going to make your writing very formal.

4. The correct style for different subjects

Different disciplines **VALUE** different styles of writing. It is really up to you to get a feel for what is required from your studies (i.e. check lecture notes, text books and articles written for that discipline). For example, **LAW AND LITERATURE STUDIES** usually call for active voice while the **SCIENCES** typically ask students to use passive voice.

The following table gives you a set of sample sentences in the three styles. Use these to help you to see the difference between active and passive voice, and nominalised writing so that you can make informed decisions about the writing style required for your discipline.

Active voice	Passive voice	Nominalisation
<i>Academic skills lecturers teach the students</i> how to write essays during Orientation Week.	<i>Students are taught</i> how to write essays by <i>academic skills lecturers</i> during Orientation Week.	During orientation week, the teaching of academic writing skills for students . . .
<i>Students practise</i> referencing and avoiding plagiarism in assessment tasks.	Referencing and avoiding plagiarism is practised by <i>students</i> in assessment tasks.	The practice of referencing and avoiding plagiarism in assessment tasks . . .
<i>Lecturers and students</i> at the university use TurnItIn to identify plagiarism in assignments	<i>TurnItIn</i> is used by lecturers and students at the university to identify plagiarism in assignments.	The use of TurnItIn for identification of plagiarism by university lecturers and students...