

Active and Passive Voice

Various professors and instructors tell their students to use **active** voice rather than **passive** voice, but what does that mean?

Passive voice:

As its name suggests, passive voice is a weak grammatical construction. In a sentence passive voice suggests that action happens *to* an object rather than an object enacting an action to something else. Some typical examples of passive verbs: **be, am, is, are, was, were, being, and been.**

A passive sentence might read like this: Bing Crosby *was heard* crooning from the radio.

This suggests that there's a person standing just next to the radio listening to Crosby, but this person doesn't actually exist as someone important.

Active voice:

This is the grammatical construction that puts the subject of a sentence as the enactor of action: Bing Crosby crooned from the radio.

This feels as if Bing Crosby were projecting his voice from the radio straight to you or whoever the listener is.

When to use active or passive voice:

Generally, you should use active voice to make your sentences more forceful, direct, and clear. However, there are situations that require passive voice. Journalistic writing often uses the passive voice the writer or newspaper isn't placing blame on anyone. Sometimes there are situations in which passive voice is clearer than active voice. For instance, consider this example from Joseph William's *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*: "The weight given to industrial competitiveness and the value we attach to the liberal arts will influence this decision."

Compare this to: This decision will be influenced by the weight we give to industrial competitiveness and the value we attach to the liberal arts.

The second sentence, though it's in passive voice, is much easier to follow, right? This is because the important information of the sentence—the fact that the decision is influenced—comes right away. Although in active voice the first sentence is less clear because its long subject muddies where the emphasis is supposed to be placed in the sentence.

For more information: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_actpass.html

