



Tip Sheet for Writers # 6

Active and Passive Voice

1. In English any action may be expressed in the active voice or in the passive voice. That is, sometimes the subject of the sentence performs the action indicated by the verb; other times, the subject is being acted on. Some examples will help clarify this:

Active

We conducted this study at Sage Hen Creek. (subject “we” doing the conducting)

Passive

This study was conducted at Sage Hen Creek. (subject “study” being acted on, being conducted, by someone else)

Active

The AXYC Company fired forty employees.

Passive

Forty employees were fired by the AXYC Company.

Active

Smith first observed this phenomenon in 1987.

Passive

This phenomenon was first observed in 1987.

2. The passive voice is useful when the agent (doer) of the activity is indefinite or unimportant:

Computers are used in many industries.

The topics covered by this guide include...

Shots were fired.

3. The passive is also appropriate when the result or the activity is more important than the agent who performed it:

These statistics are drawn from twelve regional studies.

This configuration is commonly called a figure eight.

4. In most other situations, however, you should rewrite your sentences in the active voice. Do not allow an overabundance of passive constructions to rob your writing of directness and clarity, or to turn actions into spontaneous events that unfold without any agent or actor. Notice how the following passive constructions only invite questions about what actually happened:

A change in policy was authorized. [*Who* authorized it?]

It has been determined that... [*Who* determined it?]