Clear Science Writing: Active Voice or Passive Voice?

What Is Active Voice?

An author may write a sentence in one of two "voices"—active or passive.

The active voice emphasizes the performer (or agent) of the action:

*Wind disperses plant seeds.*

*Smith et al. investigated the relationship.*

*We have analyzed the results.*

The active voice is direct (performer–verb–receiver), vigorous, clear, and concise. The reader knows who is responsible for the action.

What Is Passive Voice?

The passive voice, in contrast, emphasizes the receiver (or product) of the action:

*Plant seeds are dispersed [by wind].*

*The relationship was investigated [by Smith et al].*

*The results have been analyzed [by us].*

The passive voice is indirect (receiver–verb–performer) and can be weak, awkward, and wordy. Passive voice uses a form of the verb *to be* followed by a past participle (e.g., *dispersed, investigated*) and a *by* phrase. If the *by* phrase is omitted (the truncated passive), the reader will not directly know who or what performed the action.

A particularly awkward and ambiguous form of the passive voice occurs when an author uses *it* as the receiver rather than the first-person pronouns *I* or *we*:

*It is concluded that the treatment is effective.*

These types of passive-voice sentences are a form of hedging.

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