



## WRITING CENTER

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### Active Voice and Passive Voice

“Passive voice” is a comment that many students often receive on their essays, but which few can usually explain or edit. It used to be somewhat common to see passive voice used in academic books or articles (“In this paper it shall be argued that...”), but most professors and readers these days will be expecting you to write in an active voice. The active voice is especially important for argumentative or persuasive papers, because it adds a directness and force to your language that helps provide that persuasive tone.

So, what’s the difference? Grammatically, a sentence written in the active voice is one in which the subject *performs* the action described in the verb; the subject is active. In the passive voice, the subject is *acted upon*; it is passive in the action of the sentence.

In general, it is easier to see how this works in action—and probably easier than you think to notice it in your writing once you know what to look for. Consider these examples:

Passive:

The ball was kicked by Bobby.

A definition of just and unjust laws  
is provided in King’s letter.

Global warming is questioned by many  
people.

Active:

Bobby kicked the ball.

King provides a definition of just and unjust  
laws in his letter.

Many people question global warming.

As you can see in these examples, the subject of the sentence shifts depending on whether you use passive or active construction.

In the first column, the subjects are “the ball,” the “definition,” and “global warming;” in the second column they are “Bobby,” “King,” and “people,” which makes a lot more sense given that these are all living beings who are *capable* of performing an action.

The ball, the definition, and global warming are all objects or concepts that should come *after* the subject and verb in the sentence. In the active voice column, they do.

Still unsure about the difference between active and passive voice?

Make an appointment with the Writing Center!

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