

Active vs. Passive Voice

Traditionally professors also want students to write in the active voice. Knowing the difference between active voice and passive will make you a stronger and more flexible writer.

What's Passive Voice?

A sentence is in the passive voice if we cannot tell who or what did the action of the sentence. Perhaps Christine did the action of the sentence? Or it was Roberto? We just don't know. We could even blame a horde of **passive** half-dead corpses—we could blame **zombies**!

Examples:

The ball was thrown.

- Who or what threw the ball? We don't know! Perhaps a zombie. Let's blame a zombie.

Recently, a study was conducted to see if college students eat enough vegetables.

- Who or what did the study? Could be zombies. Yes, let's blame the zombies.

What's Active Voice?

If you can easily tell who or what did the action of the sentence, you have an active voice sentence. Active voice sentences offer clear responsibility and clear causality. For this reason they are preferred by professors.

Examples:

Christine threw the ball.

Roberto conducted a study to see if college students were eating enough vegetables.

- No zombies can be blamed (or given credit) here. These are active voice sentences.

Note: Outside of the university, writing in the passive voice can be very useful: “Recently an unfortunate chemical leak occurred in our warehouse. While some mistakes were made, ChemCo is committed to addressing the issue and keeping all employees safe from future spills.”

Things to Avoid in Formal Writing

Avoid Slang—avoid informal word choices (**diction**) in formal college writing

Example: *What the researchers found was pretty cool.*

FIX: *What the researchers found was (important/surprising/etc.).*

Avoid Contractions—avoid informal combinations of two words in formal college writing

Example: *Students **shouldn't** forget that the library offers help with research projects.*

FIX: *Students **should not** forget that the library offers help with research projects.*