

## **CAAM 600: PASSIVE AND ACTIVE VOICE: What are they? When should you use them?**

**Active voice and passive voice refer to two different ways of using certain verbs in English.**

**Active voice occurs if the subject of the verb causes or does the action.**

The children ate birthday cake. (The children did the action of eating; the cake received that action.)

The children laughed continuously. (The children did the laughing; no receiver.)

**Passive voice occurs if the subject of the verb receives the action. The doer of the action may or may not be named.**

The flowers were sent by her grandmother. (The flowers did not cause the action; grandmother did.)

The results were analyzed. (Doer is not named.)

**Analyze the following pairs of sentences to find the pattern of differences between the active and passive constructions.**

**Examples:**

**1. Active voice:** The Rice Owls won the game.

**Passive voice:** The game was won by the Rice Owls.

**2. Active voice:** After working together for four years, the team identified the key enzyme.

**Passive voice:** The key enzyme was identified by the team after they had worked together for four years.

**3. Active voice:** The study suggests the following results.

**Passive voice:** The following results are suggested by the study.

**4. Active voice:** This thesis develops a novel avenue of saving power in sensor networks.

**Passive voice:** In this thesis, a novel avenue of saving power in sensor networks is developed.

**5. Active voice:** I propose the use of foam to reduce water production in gas wells.

**Passive voice:** In this thesis, it is proposed that foam can be used for reducing water production in gas wells.

**6. Active voice:** Two implementations validate the efficiency of the proposed method.

**Passive voice:** The efficiency of the proposed method is validated by two implementations.

## **DECISION TIME:**

### **Choose Active Voice to**

- Emphasize the doer, the action, and the receiver
- Make writing more energetic and personal
- Use vigorous, precise verbs
- Reduce the number of words.

### **Choose Passive Voice to**

- Indicate that the doer of the action is unknown or unimportant
- Minimize the importance of the doer of the action
- Emphasize the receiver rather than the doer or cause
- Emphasize the passivity of the receiver of the action
- Make writing sound less controversial or personal.

In your engineering writing, use the passive voice if you want to de-emphasize the doer of the action or if it isn't important who or what is doing the action, as in a write-up of your Methods. For example, you wouldn't want a string of sentences that say "First I did..." "Next I changed..." and "Finally I compared the new approach to Monte Carlo results." Even so, try to avoid a series of sentences in passive voice. Try adding some active verbs as in, "The next step changed..." or "Compared to Monte Carlo results, the new approach performed..."

## **A FURTHER COMPLICATION:**

Some faculty members and even journals in some fields prefer passive voice to active, usually for one of two reasons. Some prefer passive voice because it removes the researcher from the writing, thereby putting more emphasis on the subject matter as an incremental, rather than a personal, contribution to the field. Those in that camp would dislike "I suggest" or "We propose." Others, including non-native speakers from certain languages, dislike using an inanimate (non-living) term as the subject of an active verb. They would avoid using inanimate subjects such as "experiment, gene, bandwidth, structure, study, nanotube, result, and procedure," although many fine writers routinely use them as subjects of active verbs.

The following sentences illustrate a choice that some writers and journals would prefer to have in passive voice:

- The experiment suggests three important results. (Active voice even though an experiment is not alive and therefore is incapable of making a suggestion.)
- Three important results are suggested by the experiment. (Passive voice puts the emphasis on the results but without making it the subject of the sentence.)