

## THE ROLE OF PASSIVE VOICE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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**Abstract:** Passive voice has long been recognized as one of the most typical grammatical features of academic writing in English. Although modern academic style increasingly allows limited use of active constructions, passive structures still play a central role in scientific writing. This article examines the language, functions, and style of passive voice in academic writing. The study looks into its grammatical structure, communicative purposes, variations across disciplines, advantages and disadvantages, and its changing role in current research writing. The analysis shows that passive constructions contribute to objectivity, depersonalization, and a formal tone while also influencing the informational structure of academic texts.

**Key words:** passive voice, academic writing, objectivity, scientific writing, depersonalization, grammar, style.

### 1. Introduction

Academic writing is quite different from everyday communication. It is marked by precision, formality, clear organization, and objectivity. One of the most noticeable grammatical features of academic English is the frequent use of passive voice.

For decades, passive constructions were seen as essential in scientific writing. Researchers were traditionally advised to avoid first-person pronouns and focus on processes and results instead of personal actions. As a result, sentences like:

The experiment was conducted.

The data were analyzed.

The results were obtained.

became standard in academic discourse.

However, in recent years, style guides and journals have started to encourage more active constructions. This change raises important questions: Why was passive voice the dominant form? What functions does it serve? Is it still necessary in modern academic writing?

This article aims to explore the linguistic and functional role of passive voice in academic writing and evaluate its importance in current scholarly communication.

## 2. Grammatical Structure of Passive Voice

Passive voice is formed using:

be + past participle (V3)

Examples:

The hypothesis was tested.

The samples were collected.

The theory is supported by evidence.

The passive construction changes the focus of the sentence. Instead of emphasizing the doer (agent), it highlights the action or the object affected by the action.

Active:

Researchers conducted the experiment.

Passive:

The experiment was conducted (by researchers).

In academic texts, the agent is often left out because it is either obvious or not important. This structural choice allows writers to concentrate on procedures, findings, and results rather than on individual researchers.

### 3. Functions of Passive Voice in Academic Writing

#### 3.1 Objectivity and Impersonality

One of the main reasons for using passive voice is to create a sense of objectivity. Academic research aims to present findings independently from the researcher's personal identity.

Compare:

Active:

We analyzed the data.

Passive:

The data were analyzed.

The passive construction removes personal reference and emphasizes the research process instead of the researcher.

#### 3.2 Focus on Process and Results

Scientific writing prioritizes procedures and outcomes. Passive voice allows the writer to focus on what was done and what was discovered.

Example:

The solution was heated to 100°C. Significant differences were observed.

The reader's attention goes to the experiment itself rather than the person conducting it.

#### 3.3 Formal Tone

Passive constructions support a formal and academic style. Because academic discourse values neutrality and distance, passive structures fit well with these stylistic expectations.

Passive sentences often sound more technical and less conversational, which reinforces the scholarly tone of research articles.

### 3.4 Information Structure and Theme-Rheme Organization

Passive voice allows better control of sentence structure and information flow.

In academic texts, known information usually appears at the beginning of the sentence (the theme), while new information comes later (the rheme).

Example:

The experiment was repeated three times.

Here, “the experiment” connects to previous sentences, while “was repeated three times” brings in new information.

This helps keep logical coherence throughout the text.

## 4. Disciplinary Differences

The use of passive voice varies among academic fields.

### 4.1 Natural Sciences

Fields like biology, chemistry, and physics traditionally use passive voice extensively.

Example:

The solution was filtered. The reaction was measured.

Scientific writing in these areas emphasizes replicability and procedural clarity.

### 4.2 Social Sciences

In psychology or sociology, passive voice is common but less dominant than in the hard sciences.

Example:

Participants were interviewed. Responses were recorded.

### 4.3 Humanities

In literature and philosophy, active voice is more common because argumentation and interpretation are central.

Example:

The author argues... Shakespeare explores...

Thus, disciplinary norms affect grammatical choices.

## 5. Advantages of Passive Voice

Promotes objectivity.

Emphasizes actions and results.

Supports a formal tone.

Improves cohesion.

Aligns with scientific tradition.

Passive voice is especially useful when the performer of the action is unknown, irrelevant, or obvious.

## 6. Criticism and Modern Trends

Despite its advantages, passive voice has faced criticism for several reasons:

It can make sentences longer and more complex.

Overuse may reduce clarity.

It may create a vague or impersonal style.

Modern academic style guides, including APA guidelines, encourage a balanced approach. Many journals now accept first-person pronouns in research articles.

For example:

We conducted a survey of 200 participants.

This change reflects a shift toward clarity and transparency instead of complete impersonality.

### **7. Passive vs Active: A Comparative Analysis**

Active:

The researchers conducted the experiment and analyzed the data.

Passive:

The experiment was conducted and the data were analyzed.

The passive version removes personal reference and focuses entirely on the research procedure.

However, active constructions may be clearer and more direct.

Therefore, modern academic writing often combines both forms strategically.

### **8. The Evolution of Passive Voice in Academic Writing**

Historically, scientific writing aimed to exclude the researcher from the text. This tradition was influenced by positivist philosophy, which emphasized objectivity and neutrality.

Today, academic writing acknowledges that complete objectivity is not possible. Therefore, controlled use of active voice is increasingly accepted.

Still, passive voice remains important for describing methods and procedures.

## **9. Pedagogical Implications**

For students learning academic English, understanding passive voice is essential.

Teachers should:

Explain when passive is appropriate.

Avoid promoting overuse.

Emphasize clarity and purpose.

Balanced usage enhances academic competence.

## **10. Conclusion**

Passive voice plays a significant role in academic writing. It contributes to objectivity, formal tone, and logical structure. While modern academic discourse allows for more active constructions, passive voice remains crucial, especially in sections on scientific methods.

Rather than avoiding passive voice altogether, academic writers should use it thoughtfully. Effective scholarly communication requires grammatical flexibility and awareness of disciplinary conventions.

The passive voice is not outdated; it is a useful stylistic tool. Its proper use improves clarity, coherence, and professionalism in academic writing.

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