



Benefits of Using Active Voice in the Sciences

1. Active voice oftentimes doesn't use as many words as passive voice.

Because passive voice requires extra words to construct a sentence grammatically, the writer will often use more words writing in passive voice than in active voice. This can be a problem when a writer is trying to be as concise as possible with their language, which is an important aspect of writing in the sciences. They might also have a word limit for their project, so rewriting a sentence in active voice is an easy way to slim down the word count.

Passive Voice:

This hypothesis is supported by the observation that the timing of spring runoff is significantly different between natural and modified basins (Moore et al., 2011). [25 words]

Active Voice:

Moore et al. (2011) support this hypothesis, observing that the timing of spring runoff is significantly different between natural and modified basins. [22 words].

2. Active voice is easier for readers to comprehend quickly and accurately.

People naturally speak in active voice when talking to one another in day-to-day life. Therefore, readers are able to comprehend things written in active voice more efficiently than things written in passive voice. Passive voice purposefully takes the researchers or other people of reference out of a sentence, and when a reader has to spend time figuring out who those people are, they waste time during the reading process.

Passive Voice:

The variation in survivorship referred to as density-dependent mortality has also been related to negative plant-soil biota feedbacks described for a temperate (Parker & Clay, 2000) and tropical tree species (Hood et al., 2004).

Active Voice:

Parker and Clay (2000) found that density dependent mortality in a tropical tree species was related to negative feedbacks between plants and soil biota. Hood et al. (2004) found a similar relationship in a temperate tree species.



3. Active voice keeps ambiguity out of the purpose of your writing and creates a larger sense of urgency about the topic.

Writing for the sciences—or any type of writing—should have some sort of purpose: calling people to action, informing people of a situation, repeating research to test credibility. Regardless of what type of writing is being done, the purpose should be as clear as possible for the reader. Because passive voice removes the real subject to comprehend, and the sentences are more complex, the purpose can be difficult to find as well.

Passive Voice:

Dramatic improvement in police and technology are needed to reconfigure agriculture and land use to gracefully meet global demand for both food and biofuel feedstocks.

Active Voice:

The Department of Agriculture must help farmers with new legislation and technology to meet global demand for biofuels without jeopardizing our food supply or environment.

4. You can use a mix of active and passive voice to provide clarity and reduce redundancy.

When writing out long and detailed explanations, only using active voice can start to sound redundant and robotic. Therefore, using a mix of both active and passive voice can add variation to a writer's work while still maintaining clarity and concision.

Example:

For liberated embryos, we directly counted all embryos in each vial. For egg capsules, we either (1) directly counted embryos in all capsules and summed them for each vial, or (2) counted embryos in 20 haphazardly chosen capsules from the same mass, calculated the mean number of embryos per capsule, and multiplied the number of capsules in a given vial by this average. The latter method was used for temperature experiments because time constraints precluded immediate counts of embryos in each egg capsule.

Examples and information taken from

Greene, A. E. (2013). Favor the active voice. In *Writing science in plain English*. (pp. 22-28). University of Chicago Press.