# MINI LESSON #3: ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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In Mini Lesson #2, we discussed how to revise your sentences for clarity.  In conjunction with that information, it's important to understand the use of **active** and **passive** voice.

*Voice* is a term that describes how to convey the action of a sentence.  As Joseph Williams also points out, voice also refers to "how a sentence makes you *feel*" (53).

*Active* sentences put the person or thing that performs the action (the character) in the beginning of the sentence and uses a concrete verb:

| Acid treatment | removed | the rust. |
|---|---|---|
| (subject/character) | (verb) | (object) |

*Active* sentences are more direct and stress who is responsible for the action.

You've probably heard over and over again to <u>only</u> write in the active voice.  While this holds true for most technical communication audiences and purposes, there are instances where the passive voice is useful.

*Passive* sentences put the object of the action at the beginning of the sentence and typically use the verb "to be."  Often, they leave out the subject (character).

| Plant seeds | are dispersed | by the wind. |
|---|---|---|
| (object) | (verb) | (subject/character) |

*Passive* sentences allow writers to stress an object or an activity by moving the subject (character) to the end of the sentence and/or delete the subject (character) when it is not important, unknown, or unseen.

*Passive* sentences also serve as a way to <u>hedge</u>. Hedging in writing is a way to make non-committal or abstract statements.  In technical communication, hedging is common when authors do not name themselves or other characters as the subject. Common constructions of this form of hedging include…*It has been noted*…, *It was apparent...It was decided*…

Lastly, *passive* sentences can also help avoid stiff writing, especially when we try to write *active* sentences by using vague pronouns:

If o*ne/we/researchers* are to understand what causes graduate students to leave their programs ABD, *one/we/they* should use research strategies that look for more than one variable rather than assume that one situation or cause is the case for all students, or adopt a strategy in which *one/we/they* study only one variable.

If we avoid nominalizations and vague pronouns, we can use **passive** sentences to create sentences that flow more cohesively:

> To understand what causes graduate students to leave their programs ABD, research strategies that look for more than one variable **should be used** rather than strategies in which one situation or cause **is assumed** to be the case for all students, or only one variable **is studied**.

To end, using **active** and **passive** voice in technical communication depends on the audience, purpose, and message. Most likely, you'll write in **active** voice the majority of the time. However, when strategically and purposefully executed, **passive** voice helps us stress an object, hedge, or avoid stiff-sounding sentences.

Sources

Every, Barb. "Clear Science Writing: Active Voice or Passive Voice?" *Biomedical Editor.*
http://www.biomedicaleditor.com/active-voice.html

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace.* 10th ed. Longman, 2011.

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Answer Key for Mini Lesson #2 Practice Sentences

1. We agreed to not buy the house.
2. They concluded that we should run a new cohort study.
3. STarting tomorrow, we will review the test results.
4. The Frankfurt Observatory discovered a new planet, which excited the scientific community.
5. When the staff failed to organize the festival properly, they disappointed us.
6. They lacked experience, which complicated how they built the new company.

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