Active/Passive Voice

To use this handout, you must first understand the difference between the active voice and the passive voice. In grammar, "voice" indicates the relationship of the subject to the action of the verb.

Voice determines if the subject of the sentence is performing or receiving the action of the verb.

- If you use the active voice, the emphasis is on the subject or the person doing the action.
- If you use the passive voice, the emphasis is on the action itself.

Active voice:

- The subject performs the action.

  *Example:* Jim (subject of the sentence) sent (action) the weekly progress report to the head of marketing.

- In the active voice, the emphasis is on the subject (what Jim did).

Passive voice:

- The subject is acted upon.

  *Example:* The weekly progress report (subject) was sent to the head of marketing by Jim (subject is stated).

- In the passive voice, the emphasis is on the action taken (what was done).

- In some sentences written in the passive voice, the subject is not mentioned. Either the person doing the action is implied, or is purposely omitted.

  *Example:* The weekly report was sent (by whom?).

Which is better?

- In most situations, the active voice is better because it is easier to read and to write, is less- wordy, and is more interesting. However, some fields (engineering, for example) prefer the passive voice because what was done is more important than who did it.

  *Example:* The experiments were done by the Kruger team. (subject identified)

  *Example:* The experiments were completed before noon. (subject not identified)

- Ask your professor whether you should use the active or the passive voice.