

Passive Voice Construction Lesson Plan

General Information	
Lesson Title	Passive voice construction
Class/Student Information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. upper-level undergraduates in an ecology or physiology course OR 2. multi-major undergraduates in an introductory technical writing course
Length of Class/Activity	30 mins
Overall Instructional Goal	To teach students the legitimate functions of passive voice in their discipline
Lesson Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the benefits of using passive voice • Describe legitimate functions of passive voice • Investigate the frequency of passive voice in student technical writing as well as the subjects associated with passive verbs • Distinguish between active and passive voice verbs and construct writing that includes legitimate functions of passive voice
How will you measure each objective?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The in-class activities measure if students can differentiate between passive and active voice verbs. Additionally, they will help students identify patterns associated with passive functions. • The homework assignments measure (a) if students understand the differences between active and passive and (b) how they make decisions to use active or passive voice verbs. • The formal writing students complete after this instruction will be measured for use of passive voice and be compared to the formal writing completed by the control students.
Justification for Lesson	Frequency of passive voice in writing correlates with academic discipline. This unit is designed to teach students <i>when</i> and <i>why</i> to use passive voice in writing.
Materials	<p>You will need access to the following documents:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This file, which outlines the lesson 2. Presentation slides for Orientation and Presentation activities 3. In-class activities for Engagement activities (printed on blue paper) 4. Homework file for Expansion activities 5. Fact sheet for Expansion activities <p>In addition, all student computers should be running AntConc, which should be loaded with the Student Writing data set.</p>

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<p>Orientation (5 min.)</p> <p>Before the lesson begins, ensure that students have loaded the student writing dataset into AntConc.</p> <p>As students load the dataset, display Slide 1 from the presentation and distribute a paper copy of the in-class activities (printed on blue paper).</p> <p>Announce the topic of the lesson. Orient students to the passive voice construction on Slide 1, emphasizing the associated <i>to be</i> verbs.</p> <p>Ask students what they remember about learning passive voice in their previous writing courses. Try not to lead the discussion, simply facilitate comments from 3-5 different students.</p> <p>Transition to Slide 2. Read the Active Voice sentence and ask what subject is being emphasized. Next, read the Passive Voice sentence and ask what subject is being emphasized.</p> <p>Finally, ask students which sentence is “more correct”?</p>	<p>Ask students to load AntConc with the student writing dataset (or have it preloaded) before you begin the lesson. This helps ensure that students stay focused on the lesson content and not get distracted by the technology.</p> <p>Facilitate rather than offer opinions on the initial discussion of passive voice. It is likely that most students have been taught to never use passives. If students provide this type of response, prompt them to expand on <i>why</i> they should never use the passive or <i>what</i> reasons their previous teachers offered. Some students might not have specific answers, suggesting they only know not to use passive voice but perhaps don’t understand why.</p> <p>Some students might comment that passives are “inhuman,” “detached,” or creates “confusing” sentences. Validate these types of responses as well, noting there are contexts when active voice is preferred to passive voice.</p> <p>Use this discussion to transition into Slide 2. The visuals should help students determine what is being emphasized in the two sentences, but prompt them to articulate that the researchers and the action of keeping the honey bees in the humidified chamber, respectively, are what’s being emphasized.</p> <p>There’s no “right” answer to which sentence is “more correct.” The purpose of asking the question is to get students to consider <i>what</i> each sentence is emphasizing—a person or an action. This emphasis signals the most important information to readers.</p>
<p>Transition</p> <p>“In fact, both sentences are grammatically correct and acceptable. Which sentence you choose, however, depends on the purpose of the writing as well as what information the readers need to know.</p> <p>In many contexts—particularly in technical and scientific writing—readers need to know about a process or action rather than the person performing that process or action.”</p>	

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<p>Presentation (3 min.)</p> <p>Transition to Slide 3. State the three benefits of using passive voice.</p> <p>Refer to (don't read) the three example sentences and tell students the examples are available in the Fact Sheet.</p>	<p>Now that you've established that writers must consider what each of their sentences should emphasize (e.g., an object, a human), explain the three benefits of using passive voice.</p> <p>Oftentimes, readers know who the actor/agent of the sentence is (because it was mentioned in a previous sentence). Therefore, it's redundant to repeat the agent in each sentence.</p> <p>Similarly, the most important information in the sentence is sometimes the object rather than the agent. The honeybee sentences in Slide 2 illustrated this.</p> <p>Finally, while passives have been labeled "inhuman" or "detached," their use is often useful in creating objectivity in technical and scientific writing. Creating a sense of objectivity can make the results (and therefore the writer) appear credible and sound.</p> <p>Each benefit has an illustrative sentence, but you don't need to read each aloud. However, inform students that these examples are available in the Fact Sheet. At this point, students may be anxiously writing everything on the slide down rather than listening to the presentation. Reduce this anxiety by assuring students that they have access to all the materials.</p>
<p>Transition</p> <p>Transition into the first in-class activity (Take a Look).</p>	
<p>Engagement (5 min.)</p> <p>Reiterate that the table includes concordances of passive structures used by STEM students in their technical writing assignments.</p> <p>Ask students to independently study the concordance lines and answer the three questions to themselves.</p>	<p>The concordance lines for this first in-class activity are provided in a paper handout to focus students' attention on the content rather than engaging them with the content AND the technology.</p>
<p>Transition</p>	

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<p>Stop the activity after about 2-3 minutes and begin the class evaluation.</p>	
<p>Evaluation (5 min.)</p> <p>Ask students to discuss the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What verbs are used? Do they have a common meaning? 2) What are the nouns preceding the verbs? Are they referring to people or to objects? 3) Why do you think the students chose the passive rather than the active structure in these examples? 	<p>Watch the YouTube tutorial on how to do this activity in AntConc: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGDW1I6ZnsQ</p> <p>Below are the key takeaways for this activity</p> <p>You might have a lot of silence when you initially ask students to report their observations. It's okay to let your students sit in silence for several seconds, eventually one of them will speak. If no one speaks after 10 seconds, report one finding to illustrate the type of information you're seeking.</p> <p>Here are some patterns that students might observe/you want to draw their attention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbs like <i>BE associated</i> (Lines 1-2), <i>BE found</i> (Lines 9-11), and <i>BE shown</i> (19-20) are used to report results/information. The nouns preceding these verbs are objects like beverages, diseases, proteins, and fish. • Verbs like <i>BE measured</i> (Line 15-16) and <i>BE compared</i> (Line 4) are used to report steps in a process or methodological approaches. These applications focus on the action rather than the person performing the action. In these instances, the agent performing these tasks are likely known (i.e., the researchers). • The nouns most frequently associated with passives are abstract objects (i.e., non-touchable) like low levels of resistance (Line 5) or specification of the processor (Line 6) or the process (Line 15). • Passive verbs can be associated with people, but typically in the form of collective nouns. For example, <i>BE provided</i> is associated with general workers (Line 18) rather than a specific worker.

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	<p>Several verbs help create a sense of objectivity. For example, the use of <i>BE educated</i> presents a claim in a more general way rather than as the writer’s personal opinion. Look at Line 1, for example, and consider why the writer chose the passive rather than the active voice?</p>
<p>Transition</p> <p>“Let’s talk more about the appropriate contexts and functions for using passive voice construction.”</p>	
<p>Presentation (5 min.)</p> <p>Transition to Slide 4. There are five primary functions for using passives. The first is for describing research methods. The Fact Sheet lists commonly associated verbs, including <i>BE analyzed</i> or <i>BE calculated</i>.</p> <p>Similarly, passives are often used to report or interpret results. The Fact Sheet lists commonly associated verbs, including <i>BE determined</i> or <i>BE expected</i>.</p> <p>Passive verbs can also help organize your writing by creating cohesion between sentences and helping you stay on topic. Finally, passives are a good way to deliver information that readers might react negatively or neutral toward.</p> <p>Transition to Slide 5. Emphasize that the benefits of using passive voice are typically context- or discipline-specific.</p> <p>For example, fields like tourism and hospitality management are human-oriented fields, so it makes sense to write more in the active voice. In contrast, fields like biology, accounting, computer science, and engineering are more object-oriented. Language/corpus studies in some these fields have found that passive voice verbs constitute almost 70% of the verbs used in research writing.</p> <p>But even in technical and scientific writing, active voice verbs are the better choice. For example, you can identify sources by name (e.g., In Smith and</p>	<p>Slide 4 should reiterate many of the patterns that students observed in the first in-class activity (i.e., describing methods, reporting/interpreting results).</p> <p>Students might not be familiar with using passives to deliver bad news—i.e., news that readers might reach negatively or neutral toward. Passive should never be used to disguise the agent, but sometimes the agent is unimportant. For example, if you’re relaying a company policy change to all employees, you want to focus the sentence on the actual policy rather than yourself.</p> <p>Now that you’ve demonstrated how writers use passives, transition into the contexts/disciplines where passives are most common. Draw students’ attention to the fact that the more object-oriented their discipline is, the more likely they are to use passive voice. Students in more human-oriented fields like tourism and English will typically use more active voice sentences.</p>

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<p>Brown’s research...) as well as use personal pronouns (e.g., We interpret these results in the following way:...”)</p> <p>In sum, you always need to ask yourself what the focus of the sentence should be. This will help you determine whether to write in passive or active voice.</p>	
<p>Transition</p> <p>“Please look at the second in-class activity labeled Data Digging, which will require you to consult the student writing data set.”</p>	
<p>Engagement (7 min.)</p> <p>Read the directions aloud. Tell students they need to write down their findings on the handout or in a computer file. Use the Student Writing data set for this activity</p> <p>Stop reading at the first bullet point and reminded students how to sort the data.</p> <p>Give students about 2 minutes to work. Then, begin to move around the classroom to answer individual questions and to troubleshoot AntConc’s functionality.</p>	
<p>Transition</p> <p>“Okay, finish up what you’re working on let’s discuss your findings”</p>	
<p>Evaluation (7 min.)</p> <p>Discuss the students’ results to the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Run a concordance of “analyzed” and sort the levels according to 1L, 2L, and 3L. How many hits do you retrieve? In how many hits is “analyzed” used in active and passive voice, respectively? What are some of the subjects that occur with “analyzed”? 2) Now run a concordance for “found” (keep 	<p>Watch the YouTube tutorial on how to do this activity in AntConc: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSIaqqKu-8M</p> <p>Below are the key takeaways for this activity</p> <p><i>Analyzed</i> includes 16 hits. Only two hits were written in active voice (lines 8 and 10), and these subjects are collective nouns rather than specific people (government and conservation groups [Line 8], study [Line 10]). So, <i>analyze</i> is strongly</p>

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<p>the sorting 1L, 2L, and 3L). Most of the instances of “found” are in the passive voice, but a few are not. What are the subjects occurring with “found” in the active voice?</p>	<p>associated with the passive. Passive subjects included objects (e.g., meat consumption, cells, plants, species). This is also a great time to reiterate the Fact Sheet related to this unit. For example, <i>be analyzed</i> is typically used to describe methods or procedures. You can see this function illustrated in these 16 concordance hits.</p> <p>Let’s compare that to <i>found</i>. There are 128 hits of <i>found</i>, many of which are active voice and connected to a specific person/or researcher or the personal pronoun <i>I</i>. For example, Lines 1 and 2 (from an abstract and from a white paper), both associate <i>found</i> with a specific researcher. If you scroll down around Lines 37-49, you see a string of <i>I</i> finds, mostly in progress reports and critical review papers. In these instances, active voice is used by the authors to claim ownership to a result or person. This can be an effective rhetorical move, but writers should be making this consciously.</p> <p>However, <i>found</i> is also associated often with passive structure. Again, the Fact Sheet for this unite shows that <i>BE found</i> is one of the most frequently used verbs related to reporting or interpreting results. White papers, critical reviews, and progress reports included many of the <i>found</i> hits.</p> <p>1)</p>
<p>Summary Statement(s) Emphasize that, despite what students might have been previously taught, there are several instances where using passive voice is not only legitimate but expected.</p> <p>Remind them about the results of the two in-class activities, stressing that passives can be used to report or interpret important technical information for readers as well as help organize sentences and paragraph.</p> <p>Transition into a discussion of the homework for this unit.</p>	
<p>Expansion (3 min.)</p> <p>Refer students to the two homework assignments.</p> <p>The first assignment asks them to identify the passive and active verbs in an abstract from a</p>	<p>The homework assignments do not require students to engage with AntConc or the student writing dataset. However, students must apply some of the data-driven principles they learned during this unit.</p>

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<p>scientific paper.</p> <p>The second assignment asks them to write a short paragraph using the provided information on wasps. Remind students to consider legitimate uses for passive voice as they construct each sentence. Refer them to the Fact Sheet for this task.</p>	<p>The first homework assignment measures if students understand the differences between passive and active voice structure.</p> <p>The second homework assignment measures if students understand when to use passive (depending on what should be emphasized in a sentence).</p> <p>The Fact Sheet on this unit should provide students with all the information they need to complete the homework. This document also contains all the slides included in the Presentation activities.</p>