

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE IN BUSINESS WRITING

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Active and passive voice are writing issues that confuse many people. Understanding active voice is important for recognising the advantage of using active voice in business letters, as well as understanding the instances in which active voice should be avoided. Knowing the difference between voices and when to employ each is imperative for writing the most effective business letters.

In sentences using active voice the subject of the sentence does the action described by the verb. This means that the subject does what the verb says. For example, in the sentence "Jane wrote the document" the subject of the sentence is Jane and the verb is to write/wrote. Because the subject of the sentence (Jane) did the action (wrote), the sentence is in the active voice.

Active voice is advantageous in written communications because it is a direct, concise and engaging manner of writing. Readers know who is acting at all times and don't need to wade through extra words to understand what is happening in any given sentence.

In business letters active voice becomes an important method of re-iterating all that an individual or company is doing for a customer or client. Active voice allows individuals or companies to claim the spotlight. For example, the sentences: "Lora is working overtime to make sure that all of the packages are sent before the deadline" and "Fabulous Frozen Foods is delighted to announce the winners of the Holiday Hamper Contest" let readers know exactly who should be praised for something (Lora and Fabulous Frozen Foods), which is a good strategy for keeping an individual or organisation at the forefront of customers' and clients' minds.

Active voice also tends to use fewer words than passive voice making it a good choice for letters with a strict word count or page limit.

The opposite of active voice is passive voice. In sentences using passive voice the subject of the sentence receives the action described by the verb. For example, in the sentence "Oliver was delayed by Steven" the subject of the sentence is Oliver, but the action (to delay/delayed) is done by Steven so Oliver, the subject, is only receiving the action.

The passive voice focuses more on an action that took place and places less importance on the person who performed the action.

In certain situations, passive voice can be suitable or preferred when writing a letter.

For instance, if you are seeking to be polite or formal, such as when making a request or an apology. Examples include "Your feedback is appreciated" or "A mistake was made".

Additionally, if you want to avoid blaming or accusing someone, especially when delivering bad news or criticism. Examples include "The deadline was missed" or "The quality was not satisfactory".

If you want to focus on the facts or the outcomes rather than the opinions or the actions. Examples include "The project was completed on time" or "The results were impressive".

The passive voice comes into play to soften the message or idea a business writer is trying to convey. Examples of this are evident in documents such as credit denial letters. Many such documents may use the passive voice and say something like, "Your request for a lower interest rate has been denied," rather than, "We deny your request for a lower interest rate."

Passive voice is also great for creating an authoritative tone, like on a sign requiring employees to wash their hands. It doesn't matter who requires employees to wash up; they just need to do it!

When you want to avoid using a gendered construction, and pluralizing is not an option: If the password is forgotten by the user, a security question will be asked.

When utilizing active and passive voice in business writing, you should be aware of some common pitfalls that can hinder your effectiveness. To avoid them, try not to overuse passive voice, as this can make your writing vague and impersonal.

Additionally, mixing active and passive voice in the same sentence or paragraph can create inconsistency and weaken your message. Furthermore, do not use passive voice to evade responsibility, as this can damage your credibility. Lastly, do not use active voice to be aggressive or rude, as this can create a negative impression.

Understanding active and passive voice is important for recognising which is the best choice for any given business letter. The advantages of active voice make it a stronger method of communication in many instances, but there are also situations in which passive voice is a better option.

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