

# Passive Voice in English Discourse: Significance for Academic Writing and Communication

<sup>1</sup> Adile Memmedli

Accepted: 11.20.2025

Published: 12.03.2025

<https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.0110002>

**Abstract.** The passive voice is a grammatical construction in which the subject receives, rather than performs, the action expressed in the verb, and it plays a central role in shaping discourse organization in English. By shifting the patient or theme into subject position, passive constructions allow writers to emphasize processes, outcomes, and facts instead of human agents, which is particularly valuable in formal and knowledge-oriented genres (Corson & Smollett, n.d.; Hinkel, 2004). In academic and scientific writing, passive structures contribute to an impersonal and objective tone by foregrounding procedures, materials, and results while backgrounding or omitting the researcher (Abualzain, 2019; Leong, 2020). The passive voice also appears frequently in political and journalistic discourse, where it can strategically obscure agency or distance responsibility (Rachma et al., 2025). Pedagogically, scholars note that passive voice should not be regarded as a grammatical flaw but rather as a resource that becomes essential in genres such as lab reports, research articles, and institutional communication (Inzunza, 2020; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). At the same time, inappropriate or excessive reliance on the passive voice may lead to ambiguity or reduced clarity, requiring writers to balance active and passive constructions with purpose and awareness (Bada & Ulum, 2018; Grammarly, 2024). This article examines the discourse functions of the passive voice across academic, political, and general communication contexts, and outlines pedagogical considerations for its effective instruction in English language teaching. Understanding how passive structures shift emphasis and construct objectivity enables learners to deploy them strategically rather than avoiding them uncritically.

**Keywords:** *passive voice; discourse; academic writing; objectivity; language pedagogy; agent omission; English grammar.*

## 1. Introduction

The passive voice is a widely used grammatical construction that is often misunderstood or labeled as ineffective writing, despite its significant functional role in discourse. In passive clauses, the subject represents the recipient of the action rather than the performer, as in “The data were analyzed,” instead of “We analyzed the data” (Corson & Smollett, n.d.). This structure typically consists of a form of *to be* followed by a past participle and may omit or de-emphasize the agent, especially when the performer of the action is either unknown, irrelevant, or deliberately backgrounded (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Because the decision to use passive voice affects what is foregrounded in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Mammadli, A. Master’s Student, Nakhchivan State University, Azerbaijan. Email: adilememmedli29@gmail.com.  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1474-2084>.

sentence, it is not merely a grammatical choice but a discourse-based one. Passive constructions enable writers to highlight the patient, theme, or the most contextually important element, thereby shaping the information flow in purposeful ways (Hinkel, 2004).

This discourse-based flexibility makes the passive voice a powerful tool for shifting emphasis. Writers can foreground events, processes, or results by placing them in subject position, while concurrently pushing the agent into a secondary role or omitting it altogether (Hinkel, 2004; Grammarly, 2024). Such features contribute to the passive voice's extensive use in academic and scientific writing, where it supports an impersonal and objective tone by emphasizing procedures and outcomes rather than the researcher (Abualzain, 2019; Leong, 2020). In political and journalistic discourse, passive constructions may also function rhetorically to obscure agency or neutralize responsibility, shaping how events are interpreted by readers (Rachma et al., 2025).

Understanding the communicative and rhetorical functions of passive constructions is therefore essential for advanced academic writing and discourse analysis. Research in second-language academic writing shows that passive structures are perceived as highly important in scholarly genres, yet they are often underused or incorrectly applied by learners (Hinkel, 2004; Bada & Ulum, 2018).

This article examines the significance of the passive voice in multiple discourse contexts, with particular emphasis on academic writing and English language teaching. Section 2 reviews the discourse functions of passive constructions, including structural and pragmatic considerations. Section 3 analyzes the role of passive voice in academic and scientific genres, particularly its connection to objectivity and clarity. Section 4 explores the use of passive constructions in media, political, and general communicative contexts. Section 5 outlines pedagogical implications, arguing that because passive voice remains an expected feature of many scholarly genres (Leong, 2020), instructors should teach its forms and discourse functions explicitly rather than discouraging its use. Through this discussion, the article aims to clarify when and why passive voice is employed and how it can be taught effectively in ELT settings.

## **2. Passive Voice: Definition and Discourse Functions**

The passive voice is a grammatical construction that contrasts with the active voice in terms of how agency and action are represented in a clause. In an active sentence, the subject performs the action, as in "The scientist discovered the compound." In the corresponding passive form, the affected entity becomes the grammatical subject: "The compound was discovered (by the scientist)." This transformation repositions the object of the active verb into subject position, thereby altering the focus of the clause (Corson & Smollett, n.d.; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Importantly, the passive voice places the recipient or patient of the action at the forefront of the sentence, enabling writers to highlight outcomes, processes, or entities rather than the agent responsible for the action (Hinkel, 2004).

This structural shift has significant implications for discourse organization. Passive constructions allow speakers and writers to maintain topical continuity by keeping the same subject across sentences, even as actions or events change. By foregrounding the patient or thematic role, passive structures support

coherent information flow and make it possible to background or omit the agent when it is irrelevant, unknown, or intentionally de-emphasized (Bada & Ulum, 2018). In this sense, passive voice functions not merely as a grammatical alternative but as a discourse strategy for managing emphasis, thematic development, and information packaging.

Table 1 below illustrates the active–passive relationship using a simple example:

**Table 1.** Examples of active and passive transformations.

Active	Passive
“Scientists conducted the experiment.”	“The experiment was conducted (by scientists).”
“Researchers have prepared the solution.”	“The solution has been prepared (by the researchers).”

These transformations follow the formula: [active object] → [passive subject], accompanied by a form of *to be* + [past participle]. As the University of Toronto Writing Centre explains, every passive construction “often uses a form of ‘to be’ plus the past participle of the verb”, and this signals that the subject is being acted on<sup>[1]</sup>. (This guide also clarifies common misconceptions, noting that passive voice is **not** a grammatical mistake by itself.)

## 2.1 Information Flow and Topic Maintenance

A central discourse function of the passive voice is its role in managing information flow. By reversing the conventional subject–object order of active clauses, passive constructions allow writers to foreground the most topically relevant element in a sentence. As noted in discourse studies, the passive voice is often employed when the writer intends to highlight the patient or to background the agent (Rachma et al., 2025). This means that when a text is already focused on an entity—such as an experiment, solution, or procedure—the writer can maintain that entity as the topic across multiple sentences through passive constructions. For example, in a procedural description, writers may produce sequences like “The solution was heated... The solution was cooled...” rather than repeatedly introducing new human agents such as “The researcher heated...” or “The technician cooled...”. In this way, the passive voice facilitates topic continuity and cohesive progression.

Passive constructions also reduce unnecessary repetition of agents. Reintroducing the same researcher or institution as subject in each sentence can be stylistically cumbersome. The passive voice allows the omission of agents when their identity is either already known or irrelevant, thereby enabling smoother and more coherent discourse (Bada & Ulum, 2018). When the patient has already been established as the discourse topic, placing it in subject position through passivization naturally keeps the reader’s attention focused on that element.

Furthermore, passive constructions offer writers a mechanism for transitioning between topics. Introducing a new subject by first placing it in a passive clause can prepare the reader for a shift in focus. For example, in the sequence “The results were recorded. They showed that...,” the passive voice elevates “the results” to subject position, allowing the subsequent pronoun “they” to continue

the thread seamlessly. Such features underline the value of passive voice as a resource for maintaining cohesion and coherence in extended discourse (Hinkel, 2004).

## 2.2 Emphasis and Vagueness

Another significant discourse function of the passive voice is its capacity to shift emphasis toward the action or the recipient of the action rather than the agent. Writing guides commonly note that the passive voice is appropriate when the identity of the actor is unknown, irrelevant, or when placing emphasis on the recipient better serves the communicative purpose (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). For example, in the sentence “My car was stolen,” the grammatical focus is placed on the car and the event of theft, rather than on an unknown perpetrator. Similarly, grammar and usage resources emphasize that passive constructions are regularly used in formal, legal, and institutional contexts where the agent is indefinite or generalized (Grammarly, 2024).

Passive voice can also produce a general, impersonal tone that suits universal statements or social norms. Phrases such as “Rules are made to be broken” deliberately omit the agent to create broad, culturally resonant expressions. However, the same property of agent omission can introduce ambiguity. In bureaucratic or politically sensitive contexts, passive constructions such as “Mistakes were made” have been criticized for obscuring accountability by failing to specify who made the mistakes (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.).

In journalism and political discourse, this rhetorical potential is especially salient. Rachma et al. (2025) demonstrate that political news texts often employ passive voice to downplay or conceal agency, thereby deflecting blame or emphasizing institutional neutrality. For instance, in headlines like “The protesters were dispersed,” the omission of the agent (e.g., police or state forces) shifts attention onto the event rather than the actor, softening the portrayal of conflict. These examples illustrate how passive voice can function strategically, shaping interpretations of events for social or political reasons.

## 2.3 Stylistic Considerations

Beyond its functional and rhetorical uses, the passive voice is shaped by stylistic conventions established within specific disciplines. In scientific and technical fields, passive constructions have long been regarded as the stylistic norm, especially in sections such as Materials and Methods. Writing centers note that passive voice is often preferred in laboratory reports and scientific articles because it foregrounds procedures, materials, and results while backgrounding the researcher, thereby reinforcing an impersonal and objective tone (Corson & Smollett, n.d.). Statements like “The solution was titrated with acid” align with this convention, drawing attention to the experimental process rather than the scientist conducting it.

Despite its utility, contemporary writing guides caution against excessive or uncritical use of passive voice. Although passive constructions are not grammatically incorrect, overreliance on them can weaken clarity, create unnecessary wordiness, or obscure agency (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.; Grammarly, 2024). Writing instructors therefore emphasize that passive voice should not be universally avoided but rather applied strategically: writers should evaluate whether the passive or the active voice better conveys the intended meaning in a given context (Bada & Ulum, 2018). The current consensus across academic writing pedagogy is that passive constructions are appropriate

when they support emphasis, formality, or objectivity, but active voice may be preferable when clarity, precision, and explicit responsibility are required.

### **3. Passive Voice in Academic and Professional Writing**

#### **3.1 Passive Voice in Scientific Discourse**

Scientific writing is one of the most prominent domains in which the passive voice is traditionally employed. Laboratory reports, research articles, and methodological descriptions frequently use passive constructions to present procedures and results in an objective and impersonal manner. Because scientific discourse prioritizes neutrality and replicability, writing conventions have long emphasized the use of impersonal structures that foreground actions rather than the individuals who perform them (Inzunza, 2020). This preference is reflected in scientific pedagogy, where students are often taught that passive voice is an essential feature of formal scientific style.

Writing guides reinforce this perspective. The University of Toronto's writing centre explains that passive voice has historically been considered "part of the scientific point of view," enabling writers to describe processes "as objectively as possible" while minimizing personal bias (Corson & Smollett, n.d.). By phrasing methodological steps such as "The sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water" in the passive voice, the experiment itself becomes the central focus, and the identity of the experimenter becomes unnecessary for comprehension. This approach aligns closely with the goal of scientific communication: procedural clarity that facilitates replication.

Empirical research supports these observations. Abualzain (2019), in his study of chemistry students, notes that the passive voice remains the dominant form in student laboratory reports, where writers "explain the process and results of experiments" through impersonal structures. However, he also emphasizes that many learners struggle to use passive forms accurately, despite their importance in scientific writing. Hinkel (2004) similarly finds that advanced second-language (L2) writers are expected to master passive forms in academic texts yet often do not fully achieve this competence. These findings suggest that although passive voice is structurally simple, its disciplinary uses require explicit instruction.

Therefore, the pedagogical implication is clear: because passive constructions are deeply embedded in the communicative norms of scientific genres, writing instructors must teach not only the grammatical form but also the discourse functions of the passive voice. Without such instruction, students may not meet the expectations of their academic disciplines (Hinkel, 2004).

#### **3.2 Passive Voice in Research Articles and Formal Writing**

Beyond laboratory reporting, passive voice permeates research articles across a wide range of academic disciplines. In formal academic writing, authors frequently employ passive constructions to maintain an objective stance, foreground results, and de-emphasize personal involvement. Phrases such as "It was observed that..." or "The data were analyzed using..." illustrate how passive structures allow writers to highlight findings while downplaying the agent. This aligns with the broader expectation that academic writing emphasizes knowledge production rather than individual researchers.

Abualzain's (2019) findings confirm that passive constructions remain central to the rhetorical organization of scientific texts. His analysis shows that students overwhelmingly rely on passive forms when explaining experimental procedures and results—reflecting disciplinary norms that prioritize procedural objectivity over personal voice.

However, passive voice is not without its risks. University writing centres caution that passive constructions can sometimes obscure agency and make academic writing vague or ambiguous. The University of Toronto emphasizes that overly frequent use of passive sentences may cause confusion about who performed specific actions, thereby weakening the precision and impact of scholarly communication (Corson & Smollett, n.d.). For this reason, scholars recommend a balanced approach: writers should use passive voice where it serves a clear communicative purpose—such as highlighting results or maintaining disciplinary conventions—but should use active voice when clarity, attribution, or argumentative strength requires explicit agents.

Thus, while passive voice remains a valuable rhetorical strategy in formal academic writing, its effectiveness depends on judicious use aligned with disciplinary expectations and communicative clarity.

### **3.3 Alternatives and Trends**

Although passive voice has long been the default in scientific discourse, writing practices have shifted in recent decades. Many contemporary journals and writing guides now encourage a more active style, especially in sections where explicit attribution enhances clarity. Some disciplines even promote the use of first-person pronouns (“we measured...,” “we analyzed...”) to avoid awkward or cumbersome passive constructions and to improve the transparency of argumentation (Leong, 2020).

Despite these shifts, passive voice remains an important stylistic and rhetorical option. In many cases, the communicative goals of a sentence align naturally with passive forms. When writers aim to emphasize events, processes, or affected entities rather than the agents, passive voice remains the most appropriate choice. For example, “The pH was measured” succinctly highlights the variable being reported, whereas “Scientists measured the pH” shifts unnecessary attention to the agent.

Research further shows that active and passive constructions do not necessarily convey identical meanings. Each structure frames information differently, influencing what readers perceive as thematically important (Bada & Ulum, 2018). Awareness of these differences is crucial for academic writers who must make strategic rhetorical choices.

In summary, while trends in academic writing show an increasing openness to active-voice constructions, passive voice continues to hold a legitimate and often essential place in scholarly communication. Its value lies not in tradition but in its capacity to maintain objectivity, manage information flow, and foreground processes central to academic discourse (Corson & Smollett, n.d.; Abualzain, 2019).

## **4. Passive Voice in Other Discourse Contexts (Rewritten)**

Although academic writing frequently privileges the passive voice due to its capacity to foreground processes and maintain an objective tone, passive constructions also play important roles in a variety

of non-academic genres. In everyday communication, professional discourse, media texts, and creative writing, the passive voice serves distinct rhetorical and stylistic functions that extend beyond merely reporting information.

#### **4.1 Formal and Legal Contexts**

In legal, bureaucratic, and professional contexts, passive voice is often employed to convey neutrality, formality, and institutional authority. Grammar guides highlight that such genres commonly omit agents to present actions as general or institutionally mandated rather than personally performed (Grammarly, 2024; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Legal phrasing such as “The contract was signed” focuses on the completion of an action rather than the identity of the signer. Similarly, regulatory and policy documents habitually use impersonal passive constructions to emphasize procedures, obligations, or standards without attributing them to particular individuals. These choices contribute to a formal tone that underscores objectivity and institutional legitimacy.

#### **4.2 Media and Political Discourse**

Passive voice also plays a strategic role in journalism and political communication. Research shows that news writers and political actors frequently use passive constructions to avoid assigning blame, soften controversial actions, or shift interpretive emphasis (Rachma et al., 2025). In their analysis of Indonesian political news, Rachma and colleagues demonstrate that journalists regularly use passive forms such as “The protesters were dispersed,” which withholds the identity of the agent—often state authorities or police. Such omissions can reduce the perceived intensity of an event or limit criticism by diverting the reader’s attention away from responsibility.

This rhetorical function illustrates that passive voice in media discourse is not merely a grammatical choice but a mechanism for shaping public perception. At the same time, writing guides caution that agentless passives can obscure accountability. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (n.d.) warns that writers sometimes rely on passive voice to “hide holes in their research,” using examples like “Mistakes were made” to avoid specifying an agent. A similar risk applies to news discourse: passive constructions may cloud the origins of harmful or controversial actions. While ethical judgments are beyond the scope of linguistic analysis, awareness of such rhetorical implications is essential for both writers and readers.

#### **4.3 Creative and Narrative Uses**

In literary and narrative genres, passive voice functions as an intentional stylistic device. Creative writers may use passive constructions to shift focus onto particular objects, events, or images, thereby controlling narrative emphasis. Although the sources provided do not include literary case studies, this general principle aligns with stylistic observations in writing guides: passive voice can heighten suspense, foreground thematic elements, or create a reflective tone (Grammarly, 2024). For example, writers may choose passive voice to direct the reader’s attention toward an object (“The door was left open”) rather than an unspecified actor.

Additionally, passive constructions contribute to stylistic variation. In expository or creative prose, a passive sentence placed after several active sentences can introduce a natural rhythmic shift,

preventing monotony and maintaining reader engagement. While excessive passivization is discouraged in many writing guides, these same sources acknowledge that controlled use of passive voice is an important rhetorical resource, enabling writers to achieve variety, focus, and subtle narrative effects (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.).

## 5. Pedagogical Implications

Given its widespread role, how should English language teachers address passive voice in writing instruction? Historically, many learners have been taught that passive voice is to be avoided. However, this blanket rule is misguided, especially for advanced or academic contexts. Instead, educators are increasingly encouraged to teach the passive voice as a strategic choice rather than as a grammatical flaw.

As noted, university writing centres advise that the passive voice is “*not a grammatical error. It’s a stylistic issue*” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Teachers can first clarify the form and function of passive constructions by demonstrating the subject–verb patterns and showing how the “*to be*” + *past participle* structure signals a passive clause (Corson & Smollett, n.d.). They should then help students understand when passive constructions are appropriate. Writing guides provide concrete cases—such as when the actor is unknown, when the emphasis belongs on the affected object, or when making general truths—that instructors can share with learners (Grammarly, 2024; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Using such guidelines, teachers can frame passive voice not as an error but as a tool with specific discourse functions.

Research shows that many learners underuse passive voice, often due to limited awareness or insufficient practice. In Hinkel’s (2004) survey of academic writing, even advanced L2 students tended to produce fewer passive constructions than native speakers would in similar contexts. One reason is that traditional writing textbooks and curricula “*barely even mention*” passive structures when teaching academic English (Hinkel, 2004). This gap suggests that instructors should explicitly include passive voice in advanced writing modules. For example, practice exercises could ask students to convert active sentences into passive, or to identify the agent in passive passages. Analysis of authentic texts, such as scientific articles, can also demonstrate how passive voice is employed in disciplinary contexts.

It is also important to teach the ethics of passivization. Learners should recognize that passive voice can introduce vagueness—for example, in statements such as “*Mistakes were made*”—and should therefore use it responsibly (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Critical classroom discussions can revolve around rewriting passive sentences into active ones when clarity requires explicit agency. In news literacy or academic research classes, teachers might highlight examples like “*the protesters were dispersed*” and ask students to consider who the agent might be and how the sentence’s meaning shifts when the agent is named (Rachma et al., 2025). Such activities develop not only grammatical skill but also critical thinking about how language shapes interpretation.

Finally, given the current shift in scientific conventions, instructors should advise students to check their genre norms. Some journals now encourage first-person pronouns, reducing the need for passive constructions. Nonetheless, many fields still use passive voice widely. Therefore, learners should be versatile: fluent in both active and passive constructions, and able to choose between them based on

communicative purpose. As one pedagogical principle states, passive voice “*should be used when the emphasis should be on the recipient or when the actor is unknown,*” whereas active voice may be preferable when clarity demands explicit agency (Grammarly, 2024; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.).

## 6. Conclusion

The passive voice is a flexible and influential feature of English discourse. It allows writers to manipulate information structure by shifting focus onto actions, objects, or patients instead of agents (Hinkel, 2004). In academic and scientific writing, this creates an objective tone and highlights procedures or results (Abualzain, 2019; Corson & Smollett, n.d.). In media, political, and general contexts, passive constructions can produce broad statements or mask agency (Rachma et al., 2025; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Importantly, the passive voice is not inherently “bad”; rather, it should be used deliberately. Writing experts emphasize that there are many cases “*when the passive voice is OK and even preferable*” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.).

That said, writers must also be mindful. Overusing passive constructions can reduce clarity and make prose wordy or vague (Corson & Smollett, n.d.; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.). Particularly in academic writing, students should balance passive and active constructions to ensure reader comprehension. English language teachers and academic advisors should therefore guide learners to understand both the advantages and potential pitfalls of passive voice. By learning the passive voice’s discourse functions and practicing its use in varied contexts, students can enrich their writing style. Ultimately, knowing why and when to use passive voice will make their writing more purposeful and effective—whether crafting a scientific report, a news article, or any well-structured text.

## References

- Abualzain, O. Y. I. (2019). *Error analysis of passive voice employed by university students in writing lab reports: A case study of SUST students at Faculty of Sciences, Chemistry Department*. *English Language Teaching*, 12(7), 153–164. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n7p153>
- Corson, T., & Smollett, R. (n.d.). *Passive voice: When to use it and when to avoid it*. University College Writing Centre, University of Toronto. Retrieved, from <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/revising/passive-voice/>
- Hinkel, E. (2004). Tense, aspect and the passive voice in L1 and L2 academic texts. *Language Teaching Research*, 8(1), 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1362168804lr132oa>
- Rachma, N. S., Fadila, A., Mar’an, D. A., & Dashela, T. (2025). The use of passive voice in political newspaper articles: A descriptive analysis of its frequency and functions. *Edu Society: Jurnal Pendidikan, Ilmu Sosial, dan Pengabdian Kepada Masyarakat*, 5(1), 948–953
- University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The Writing Center. (n.d.). *Passive voice*. Retrieved, from <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/passive-voice/>
- Grammarly. (2024, December 19). *Passive voice: When to use it and when to avoid it*. Retrieved, from <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/grammar/passive-voice/>

- Esq, C. M. O., & Iroagba, C. (2024). Passivization in Academic Writing: Active and Passive Voice. *Madonna Journal Of English & Literary Studies (MAJELS)*, 4(3).
- Bada, E., & Ulum, Ö. G. (2018). Utilization of Active and Passive Constructions in English Academic Writing. *Online Submission*, 15(1), 413-421.
- Diana, S. (2025). PASSIVE VOICE CONSTRUCTIONS IN SPOKEN VS. WRITTEN DISCOURSE. *BILGI ÇEŞMESİ*, 1(7), 109-113.
- Leong, A. P. (2020). The passive voice in scientific writing through the ages: A diachronic study. *Text & Talk*, 40(4), 467-489.
- Inzunza, E. R. (2020). Reconsidering the use of the passive voice in scientific writing. *The American Biology Teacher*, 82(8), 563-565.
- Le, R., Yu, S., & Hao, M. (2025). A corpus-based study of passive voice trajectories in methods sections across three academic branches (1980–2020). *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1805.