

active voice verbs are preferred in business writing

Active-Voice Verbs Are Preferred in Business Writing: A Comprehensive Analysis

Author: Dr. Evelyn Reed, PhD in Professional Communication, Certified Business Writing Instructor, and author of *The Business Writer's Handbook*. Dr. Reed has over 20 years of experience teaching and consulting on business writing, specializing in clarity, conciseness, and effective communication strategies. Her expertise specifically includes the impact of grammatical choices, such as active-voice verbs, on professional communication outcomes.

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The Historical Context: Why Active Voice Reigns Supreme

The preference for active-voice verbs in business writing isn't a recent trend; it's a principle rooted in the evolution of effective communication. Early forms of business communication, often characterized by elaborate phrasing and indirect language, gradually gave way to a more direct and efficient style. This shift coincided with the rise of industrialization and the increasing importance of rapid, clear communication in commerce. The telegraph, then the telephone, further emphasized the need for brevity and precision. Ambiguity was costly, and active-voice verbs, with their straightforward subject-verb-object structure, became crucial for minimizing misunderstandings and maximizing efficiency.

The 20th century saw the formalization of these principles in style guides and business writing textbooks. Publications like *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, while not explicitly focused on business writing, significantly impacted the broader writing landscape, advocating for clear, concise prose. This emphasis on clarity naturally favored the active voice, which immediately identifies the actor and the action. The passive voice, often characterized by its use of "to be" verbs and vague subjects, was seen as obfuscating and inefficient—traits wholly undesirable in a business context. This historical context underscores the enduring relevance of the principle: active-voice verbs are preferred in business writing.

Current Relevance: Why Active Voice Remains Essential

Despite the evolution of communication technologies, the core principles underlying the preference for active-voice verbs in business writing remain strikingly relevant. In today's fast-paced business environment, clarity and conciseness are more critical than ever. Emails, reports, presentations, and

memos—all essential components of modern business communication—demand precision and efficiency. Active-voice verbs are preferred in business writing because they directly contribute to these qualities.

1. **Clarity and Precision:** Active voice eliminates ambiguity by clearly identifying who is performing the action. For example, "The marketing team launched the new campaign" is far clearer and more direct than "The new campaign was launched by the marketing team." The former sentence immediately establishes the subject (marketing team) and the action (launched), leaving no room for misinterpretation.
1. **Conciseness and Efficiency:** Active voice sentences tend to be shorter and more to the point. This conciseness saves time for both the writer and the reader, improving overall efficiency in communication. In a busy professional environment, brevity is a significant asset. Active-voice verbs are preferred in business writing because they facilitate efficient communication.
1. **Stronger Impact and Engagement:** Active voice sentences are generally more dynamic and engaging. They create a sense of immediacy and action, making the writing more impactful and persuasive. This is particularly important in marketing materials, proposals, and other forms of communication designed to influence readers.
1. **Improved Professionalism:** Consistent use of active voice demonstrates attention to detail and grammatical precision, contributing to a more professional image. This is crucial for building credibility and trust with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders. The preference for active-voice verbs in business writing reinforces professionalism.
1. **Avoidance of Ambiguity and Misunderstandings:** The passive voice can sometimes obscure responsibility or obscure the actor of the action, potentially leading to confusion or even misinterpretations of critical information. Active voice removes this ambiguity, especially vital in legal or regulatory documents.

Exceptions and Nuances: When Passive Voice Might Be Appropriate

While active-voice verbs are preferred in business writing, it's not an absolute rule. There are instances where the passive voice can be more appropriate, though these are generally the exception rather than the norm. For instance, the passive voice can be used when:

The actor is unknown or unimportant: "The window was broken."

The focus is on the action rather than the actor: "The report was completed on time."

To maintain objectivity: In scientific reports or technical documentation, the passive voice can help to avoid bias.

To emphasize the recipient of the action: "The employee was given a promotion."

However, even in these cases, careful consideration should be given to whether the active voice could achieve a clearer and more concise expression. The overriding principle remains that active-voice verbs are preferred in business writing whenever possible.

Conclusion

The preference for active-voice verbs in business writing is not merely a stylistic choice; it's a principle grounded in the historical evolution of effective communication and the practical demands of the modern business environment. While exceptions exist, the clear advantages of active voice—clarity, conciseness, stronger impact, and improved professionalism—make it the preferred choice for most business communication. Embracing active voice is a crucial step towards improving the overall effectiveness and impact of your business writing. Active-voice verbs are preferred in business writing because they contribute directly to achieving clear, concise, and persuasive communication.

FAQs

1. What is the difference between active and passive voice? Active voice emphasizes the subject performing the action (e.g., "The dog chased the ball"). Passive voice emphasizes the action being done to the object (e.g., "The ball was chased by the dog").
1. How can I identify passive voice in my writing? Look for sentences with a form of "to be" (is, are, was, were, etc.) followed by a past participle (e.g., "was written," "is being considered").

1. Are there any tools that can help me identify passive voice? Yes, many grammar and style checkers can detect passive voice constructions.
1. Is it always wrong to use passive voice? No, but it should be used sparingly and strategically, primarily when the actor is unknown or unimportant.
1. How can I rewrite passive sentences into active voice? Identify the actor of the action and make it the subject of the sentence. Then, use a strong active verb.
1. Does using active voice always make my writing better? Not necessarily, but it generally leads to clearer and more concise writing.
1. Can I overuse active voice? Yes, it's possible to overuse active voice, leading to monotonous and repetitive writing. Vary your sentence structure for better flow.
1. What are the implications of using passive voice in formal business documents? Using too much passive voice can make your writing seem unclear, indirect, and less professional.
1. Where can I find more resources on business writing style? Numerous books, websites, and online courses offer guidance on business writing style and the effective use of active voice.

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Nov 7, 2023 · Use this guide to understand what voice is and how it is used in APA Style. Then practice rewriting sentences from the passive voice to the active voice to help make your ...

Active and Passive Voice - Sam M. Walton College of Business

Voice, in grammar, describes whether the subject of a sentence is acting (active voice) or being acted upon (passive voice). Writers have occasion to use both voices, but most writers ...

Active vs. Passive Voice - University of Wyoming

For most writing, active voice is the preferred form. But if you want to emphasize the action as the subject of the sentence, rather than the agent, use passive voice. (This use is most common in ...

WRITING IN THE ACTIVE VOICE - Regent University

Active voice helps make writing strong and concise. The opposite of active voice is passive voice, which occurs when a writer pairs a “to-be” verb (am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been) with a ...

Active Voice Verbs Are Preferred In Business Writing

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Using Active Voice - Texas Woman's University

Although passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, using active verbs instead of passive verbs makes writing more direct and immediate. Things happen instead of being talked about, so the ...

Filipino Students' Active-Passive Voice Preference in ...

Active voice is generally used in business writing to emphasize the doer of the action. In this way, the reader or the audience will not be wondering who does the action (Munalim, 2014).

Active Voice and Passive Voice - Utah Valley University

The relationship between verbs and nouns in writing indicates what is important in each sentence. Active voice prioritizes the subject, and passive voice prioritizes the action. In most cases, ...

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Active And Passive Voice Exercises

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Active and Passive Voice - University of Colorado Colorado ...

Active voice is generally preferred in non-scientific writing to compose sentences that are concise, clear, and easily readable. In addition, active voice often utilizes action verbs that many ...

Microsoft Word - Active and Passive Voice.doc - Hunter ...

When a sentence is written in the active voice, the subject performs the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action. In academic writing, it is generally preferred to choose ...

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