



## AVOIDING THE PASSIVE VOICE TRAP

by the student editors of **TACKLING YOUR FIRST COLLEGE PAPER**,  
a Students Helping Students™ book

We've all heard it from our English teachers—passive voice is evil and we're to avoid it at all costs. True? Most of the time, but not always. Below are some suggestions of how to handle it in your papers.

The passive voice is a combination of a form of the verb "to be" (is, was) and a verb.

The active voice eliminates the "to be" verb and places the verb in the past, present, or future tense. In other words:

**PASSIVE:** was running/were being chased

Biff **was running** from the giant poodle.

The Backstreet Boys **were being chased** by giant poodles.

**ACTIVE:** ran/chased

Biff **ran** from the giant poodle.

Giant poodles **chased** the Backstreet Boys.

It's not necessarily wrong to use the passive voice. Sometimes it works and might be the only way to make a point. But in general, stick to its active counterpart. It makes your writing sound powerful and more direct. The active voice is easier to understand and more clearly expresses your point. Many professors say that the passive voice sounds more abstract and tentative, and abstract and tentative is not what you want to sound like in your college papers.

*"I think people sometimes overcompensate by avoiding the passive voice completely. Focus on varying your sentence structure instead."*

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