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Why passive voice can be valuable in academic medical writing

Swarna Buddha Nayok[1], **Harsh Pathak**[2]

[1]Assistant Professor/Clinician Scientist, Centre for Brain and Mind, Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, Karnataka State, India
swarnabuddha@gmail.com
orcid.org/0000-0002-3173-4248

[2]Senior Resident, Clinical Research Training Fellow, Clinical Research Centre, Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, Karnataka State, India
drpathak13@gmail.com
orcid.org/0000-0002-3135-2784

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Declaration of Interests

Both authors have read and approved the manuscript.

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Declaration of Generative Artificial Intelligence and Artificial Intelligence-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT and Grammarly to check grammar. After using these tools/services, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Scientific journals often encourage writers to use the active tense in their manuscripts.[1] Active tense follows the subject–verb–object structure and is suggested to be precise and clear. Paragraphs with passive sentences tend to be scored as "difficult to read" on readability scales (e.g., The Flesch Reading Ease Scale). Ease of reading scales rate text based on word, sentence, and syllable ratios. Since passive sentences are often longer, these scales usually consider them harder to read. Poor readability scores lead editors and reviewers to rate a manuscript poorly.[1,2]

However, sentences in passive voice are commonly used despite journals requiring active tense.[1,2] Articles written by non-native English speakers may have more sentences in passive voice, as several non-English languages allow the construction of indirect passive tense using intransitive verbs.[2] Non-native English speakers may also naturally use passive voice because it is common in their native languages, and they may find it challenging to switch to active voice when they begin writing in English.[2]

This use of passive language should not be discouraged; in fact, medical literature may benefit from using passive sentences. Studies have shown that the recall of passive voice is not inferior to that of active voice.[3] It is our opinion that research methods and results may be better understood and recalled in passive voice. Active voice is preferred in English literature broadly as it emphasizes on the "doer" of the action. However, in scientific writing, where the reader already knows who conducts the study, passive voice is more suitable when describing the research methods. Further, as the methods typically highlight how and what is done, not who does it, passive voice offers an unbiased narrative by distancing the subject from the action.[1] Recent research has shown passive voice may even improve generalisability and abstraction through psychological distancing.[4]

A typical paragraph on statistics in the methods section of an article may sound forced, repetitive, and pompous when changed into active voice. For example, when changing "*The data analysis was performed using SPSS. The adequacy of the sample was checked by Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. Variance Inflation Factor were used to rule out any multicollinearity*" to "*We analyzed the data using SPSS. We checked the adequacy of the sample using Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. We used the Variance Inflation Factor to rule out any multicollinearity*".

Medical writing must be presented clearly, simply, and engagingly. Editors should not reject manuscripts solely based on readability scores. Unfortunately, despite over 25 years of debate about the use of passive voice in scientific writing, journal and grant-writing guidelines encourage the use of active voice.[5] Professionals related to academic writing training must re-evaluate the usefulness of the strict use of active voice in medical writing and acknowledge the value of passive voice.

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