

Passive Voice

Some instructors at VCC require that lab reports be written in the passive voice. In scientific reports, the emphasis is on the action not on the person performing the action. Experiments are supposed to be reproducible by anyone, so the experimenter is not important to the results — though some modern scientists disagree with this philosophy. This is why reports are sometimes written in the passive voice. Using the passive voice focuses the attention on the action (the experiment and the results) rather than on the doer (you).

A sentence is in the active voice if the subject of the sentence performs the action:

Active: *Ryan poured the hydrochloric acid into the beaker.*

Who did the pouring? The subject, Ryan, did.

A sentence is in the passive voice if the object of the action (receives the action) is the subject of the sentence.

Passive: *The hydrochloric acid ~~was~~ ^{was} poured into the beaker by Ryan.*

Who did the pouring? Ryan did, but the hydrochloric acid is now the subject of the sentence. The hydrochloric acid got poured.

Notice that the verb in the passive sentence used a form of "to be" (is, are, was, were, can be, etc.) followed by the past participle of the verb. If it's relevant, the doer can be indicated with the word *by*, but the doer is usually omitted altogether in lab reports. The sentence will still make sense:

Passive: *The hydrochloric acid ~~was~~ ^{was} poured into the beaker.*

You should find out from your instructor whether you need to use passive voice in your lab reports.