Passive Voice vs. Active Voice Study Sheet

Goals of this Study Sheet
This study sheet hopes to alert you to the difference between passive voice and active voice—passive voice is how a sentence is constructed when the subject is the recipient of the action of the verb. Active voice in writing is when the subject performs the action of the verb. Both can be effective in writing, but the key is to know when to use them. Using the active voice more frequently in reports, essays, and research articles can be more effective—it is important to use concise and clear language in these situations. The more concise your language, the more information you can bring into your paper.

Purpose and Use of Passive Voice
Passive voice utilizes transitive verbs, usually combining a form of the verb “to be” with a past participle.

Passive Voice in Context
“A book was given to me for my birthday.”
Here, you can see that, in answer to a possible question, the sentence literally describes how I had received an action and an object in the past.

Passive Voice Stylistically
“The lake was lit by moonlight.”
Within the realm of creative writing, passive can absolutely make your ideas stronger. Using the passive rather than active voice here lends a softer feeling to the scene, perhaps creating a sort of romance and nostalgia to the image. “Moonlight brightened the surface of the lake” sounds much more clinical and does not structurally lend itself to the possible tone.

From the Writing Center
at the Academic Resource Center
John Tyler Community College
Purpose and Use of Active Voice

Active Voice for Emphasis and Style
“This killed the man.”

There is a finality here, not only due to the use of the word “killed,” but also due to the brevity of the sentence and the short amount of words. It is a strong, somber sentence.

Active Voice in Research
I mentioned before how active voice may lend itself stylistically to research papers. For reference, take a look at these sentences.

“Francine Shapiro, M.D. developed EMDR for severely traumatized patients as an alternative to traditional cognitive behavioral therapy.”

In a research essay, this sentence would be introducing the source/background of the subject immediately while expanding on what EMDR would have been for in a concise way.

“Rosalind Franklin, an English chemist and X-Ray crystallographer, discovered the structure of DNA, though she was not credited for it.”

In a profile essay, this would be a strong opening sentence for the introductory paragraph or the topic sentence of a body paragraph. Immediately, you know her name, her occupation, her claim to notoriety, and are alerted to a lack of recognition.

In Conclusion
When writing reports/research/profiles/scientific papers, you’ll want to avoid overusing either the passive or the active voice. Though precise writing lends to the tone and credibility of your subject matter, staggering your active voice sentences with passive voice sentences makes your essays flow. To have every sentence be in the active voice is to read choppy sentences. To read every sentence in the passive voice is to be
lulled to sleep. Learning when to switch between the two and when to change on to the other can make all the difference in your essay-writing endeavors.

**Links to Additional Resources**

[https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/activepass.htm](https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/activepass.htm)