

## Using Verbs in Active and Passive Voice

Here you can learn the basics about

- **writing in the active and passive voice in an academic paper.**

This information sheet provides some ideas on using active and passive voice (in particular the use of “we/I”). It is related to Information Sheet 3: *Using Verb Tense*.

### Basics

Sentences can be written in the active voice

*This research investigates the three main disruptive causes.*

*We calibrated the equipment using ...*

or in the passive voice (with the help of the verb “to be”).

*The three main disruptive causes are investigated in this research.*

*The equipment was calibrated using ...*

Most style guides recommend using the active voice wherever possible; it generally makes a text easier and more interesting to read.

However, that recommendation can lead to your text appearing to be more about you, the researcher(s), and less about your research, especially when it leads to overuse of “we/I”.

### When Using the Passive Voice Makes More Sense

Although using the active voice is often the better alternative, instances can arise when the passive voice makes more sense, e.g.,

- when the subject of an action is unknown or unimportant  
e.g., *The equipment was calibrated using ...*
- when you don’t want to identify who performed the action  
e.g., *The results were misinterpreted.*
- when using the passive helps the flow of the text because it makes the subject shorter or permits a previously introduced term (old information) to be placed near the front of the sentence and what should be emphasized at the end.  
e.g., *The initial research resulted in further tests. To ensure validity, those tests were performed by independent researchers.*

### Judge for Yourself

Below is a short text where the verbs have been written mainly in the active voice, and several sentences have the word “we” as the subject. The same text is also written

with more verbs in the passive voice, avoiding overuse of “we”. Decide for yourself which version you prefer.

*1) In this paper, we describe a new rapid LVV estimation method, the filling method, based on a T-LiDAR point cloud. In the method, the branch point clouds are divided into leaf points and wood points. We used RiSCAN PRO 1.64 to manually separate the leaf points and wood points under careful visual inspection. As a result of the research, we suggest that the proposed method can be conveniently used to calculate the LVV of coniferous and broad-leaf species under specific scanning settings. In future research, we plan to form hypotheses as a background for further studies to explain this phenomenon.*

*2) This paper describes a new rapid LVV estimation method, the filling method, based on a T-LiDAR point cloud. In the method, the branch point clouds are divided into leaf points and wood points. RiSCAN PRO 1.64 was used to manually separate the leaf points and wood points under careful visual inspection. Our results suggest that the proposed method can be conveniently used to calculate the LVV of coniferous and broad-leaf species under specific scanning settings. Our future research will include forming hypotheses as a background for further studies to explain this phenomenon.*

### Useful Resources

Cargill, M. & O’Connor, P. 2009. *Writing Scientific Research Articles: Strategy and Steps*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.

[https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/style/ccs\\_activevoice/](https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/style/ccs_activevoice/)

### Final Comments/Tips

- The words “we/I” are being increasingly used in academic writing, more in some journals than in others. You should check the use of the word in the journal you are intending to write for.
- It is confusing for your reader if you use the word “we” for a single author paper unless you are referring to yourself AND the reader. If you don’t want to use “I”, then use the passive voice or explain somewhere that the “we” refers to a research team.
- You will generally find more passive voice in the methods section (because it is more about the methods than about the researcher).
- When deciding on whether to use the active or passive voice, ask yourself what/who the sentence is about. That thing/person should then be the subject of your sentence. The subject word(s) will then determine whether you use the active or passive voice.