

# Passive Voice In The Methodology Sections Of Research Journal Articles

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## ABSTRACT

It has been noted that sentences in academic writing are written both in active and passive sentences. These two forms of grammar in writing have been applied according to how the writers express their ideas in especially academic writing, e.g., journal articles. However, some reviewers and even some grammarian machines sometimes suggest that the writers should change the passive sentences into active forms. This research attempts to analyze the journal articles published online, especially in the framework sections. The data were purposively taken from 12 journal articles that were selected based on purposive sampling by considering that the academic journals have been published online. It is assumed that all the articles had undergone blind review and therefore, they were legibly published. The sentences of the passive forms were taken from the framework sections. From these data, the passive sentences were taken into a table and the frequencies were presented. The results show that most of the authors of the articles use passive sentences in different number. Some use more passive sentences while other less compared to one another either sentence level, clause level, or phrase level. It can be concluded that the authors use passive sentences when they asserted arguments avoiding the agent for making less subjective. In other words, passive sentences are used to reduce subjectivity of the arguments.

**Keywords:** genre analysis, applied linguistics, academic writing, passive voice, subjectivity.

## I. Introduction

There are some controversies of whether the authors should use active sentences or passive sentences in academic writing. This phenomenon can be seen especially when the authors find their articles having been checked by grammarly machine by the editorial boards of certain journal publishers. In that case, some authors may revise them into active sentences while others remain making them in passive

sentences for some reasons. One of the reasons is to reduce subjectivity in arguments. They try to mention the personal pronouns of “**I**” or “**We**” in order to avoid subjectivity or personal opinion in their academic writing.

So far, there have been some journals that publish the articles internationally online in the international journal publications. They have their team of editorial boards membership who provide guidelines for writing the articles. They

also provide some comments on the articles submitted by the authors. When it comes to the sentences, especially using grammarly machine, they suggest that some sentences which are in passive construction should be changed into active sentences. In this case, some authors can follow the suggestion but other may still keep their sentences not being changed into passive for some reasons. However, according to Lasersohn (2016), it can be distinguished between fact and opinion. Fact can be stated using passive construction with opinion can either be in passive and active using personal pronouns. The most common reason is that they try to avoid subjectivity in writing their arguments in the academic writing.

Whatever is done in accordance to the editorial boards' suggestions, the authors commonly have to follow them for they want to have their articles published. These journals are considered to have been accredited because they have some prerequisites or requirements to be academic or scientific. The journals cannot be accredited when the articles are not considered academic or scientific. One of characteristics being scientific is the existence of the reviewers who scrutinize the articles prior to publication. Therefore, these journals always have their reviewers whose job is reviewing the articles to be published.

Through the hard efforts done by the reviewers, all the research articles (RAs), are considered eligible for publication. However, they should undergo the next process of editing. Therefore, these RAs are then submitted to the editors for editing process. From this process, the RAs before and after publication are different in terms of the language expressions (Djuwari, 2013). The RAs before editing process must reflect the authors' original language when compared to the RAs after publication. Since these RAs are eventually published in the accredited journal, it is assumed that they are considered scientific. Sentences in the articles

are usually commented for revision. Through such a process the journals can publish the articles because the articles have been scrutinized and regarded eligible for publication.

However, a controversy dealing with whether the authors must use active sentences or passive sentences appears to be very important for further discussion. Such a condition indicates that articles are also considered scientific, commensurate with the guides stipulated by the journal's guides of writing style. In that case, the reviewers can have the same idea for measuring whether the articles are either rejected or accepted. The rejected can also be categorized into the accepted with little revision, the accepted with major revision, or even the rejected due to the inappropriateness with the regulation stipulated for being scientific.

Being scientific can be measured by the language being expressed by the authors. This expression is mostly known as the arguments. The arguments in the RAs represent more original language by the authors when they are expressed in the framework sections. This section is considered essential because the authors have more sentences for expressing their arguments based on their theory and methodology. That is why the research on analyzing passive sentences can be attractive when the sentences are taken from the sections of frameworks of the academic articles.

Due to the importance of arguments in the framework sections of RAs, the researcher in this study is curious to find out to what extent passive sentences are expressed by the authors of academic journals in online journal publications. From this finding, it can also be found out how the authors use the passive constructions in their framework sections of their articles: sentence level, clause level, and phrase level. The result of this study is expected to provide information whether passives sentences must be used or not in academic writing, especially in journal article publications.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

As a student of English as a second or foreign language, he or she might avoid passive voice verbs at all costs to make the writing more vivid and direct for the readers. The axiom of avoiding passive sentences is so pervasive in writing courses that few question its purpose or viability as a rule. Strunk and White (2009) have this to say about the passive voice that if the writers avoid using passive voice, it does not mean they discard that pattern as Strunk and White realize that passive voice is frequently much convenient and necessary. Yet, Sigel (2009) argued that the writers can either use passive or active sentences in academic writing. He declared that by suggesting using active sentences, it does not mean that passive sentences are treated minor. Both are the same. Therefore, controversy using active or passive sentences in academic writing does not reduce the scientific value when referred to the arguments above.

It is stated again that as a professional copy editor, one of the jobs is to evaluate and alter the structure of scholarly writing. This is done to make it clearer and more accessible for the intended audience (Djuwari et al., 2022). In addition, passive voice verbs make up about 30% of the total number of verbs in a scholarly manuscript. These manuscripts are in the forms of dissertations, theses, journal articles, or conference papers (White, 2009).

### Passive Sentences

The construction of passive sentences is indicated by the third verb forms. This is also identified by the agent but sometime it is omitted when dealing with the topics in general. It can also be without agents when the agents are clearly understood. For example, "This research was conducted to examine the factors that affecting the juveniles' crimes." See also some description about it in Davidson (1982)

A passive sentence is simply a sentence that contains one or more passive voice rather than active voice verbs. It can be done by moving from an active to a passive sentence often by changing the place of the direct object of the sentence to the subject. For example, take these two sentences (Davidson, 1982):

We used a structural equation to test the model.

A structural equation was used to test the model.

In the first sentence (active), the subject is "we" and "structural equation" is the direct object. Conversely, the second sentence (passive) makes "structural equation" the subject, eliminates the doer of the action (we), and makes it ambiguous that used the structural equation to test the model. The reader must assume that since the authors are presenting empirical research, they are the ones who used the structural equation. Strunk and White (2009) also described about passive voice verbs that the passive voice is convenient in scholarly writing for at least two reasons. In fact, there are times when the passive voice is more appropriate than the active voice to help preserve the goals of research. See also in the guidelines as stipulated in Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th ed. (2001).

### Academic Manuscripts and Passive Sentences

There are many academic articles published in the journals and presented in the conferences. When referring to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001), it is stated that the passive sentences can be accepted when it is implemented in expository writing. More importantly, it can also be used when the author wants to focus on the object or recipient of the action rather than on the actor. In that way, the subjectivity is avoided. Again, this

is still controversial since there are lots of articles published in the journals are written using active sentences with the personal pronouns of “I” and “we”. “I” refers to a single author while “We” the plural subjects or authors.

Still in reference to the APA guidelines, it is the use of active rather than passive voice. There is no problem whether using active or passive construction. It is also stated though that there are times when the writer uses the passive voice. As it is argued this passive construction is intended to avoid first person. This can be in theses or dissertation (Msuya, 2019)

### Passive Voice

The passive voice makes the subject the person or thing acted on or affected by the action represented by the verbs. The passive voice which occur in the clauses are those that the passive construction using the third form of the verbs (Celce-Murcia, 2002). In this study, the construction of passive voice patterns consists of three levels. One is passive voice in phrases, second passive voice in clauses, and third passive voice in sentences (Djuwari, 2013). These three levels may occur in any writing and especially also in research writing. In addition, passive sentences can be either with agents or without agents (Shaw, 2012; Wiredu, 2012). More importantly, academic writing as genre type for the research journals or theses and dissertation can be either using passive or active (Hyland, 2008).

#### I. Passive Verbal in Phrases

Passive verbal in phrases are those phrases that entail the verb of the third forms which are in passive voice. It can be in the noun phrase of the subject of a sentence or in the object position. The examples of these passive voices in phrases are as follows:

a) The research instrument used in this study is questionnaire

b) The researcher distributed the questionnaires that have to be filled in by the respondents,

#### 2. Passive Verbal in Clauses

These passive patterns are embedded on the main sentence. The examples of these passive voices are as follows:

a) What was presented by the researchers in this discussion section provides some evidence and the results based on the analysis.

b) The readers did not find the way how the respondents were interviewed in the depth.

#### 3. Passive Verbal in Sentences

Passive voices in sentences are those sentences that are in their passive voice standing alone. It can be with agent or without agent. The examples of these passive sentences as follows:

a) The research was done to examine the effect of grammar skill on writing skill. (Without agent)

b) The questionnaires were filled in by the respondents. (With agent)

The passive voice is the grammatical pattern that is at least for intermediate level and to higher levels they can always be found in academic writing. According to Staples et al (2016) passive voice is considered an intermediate feature in academic writing. The sentences with such patterns can always be found in scientific writing such as research journals and some theses or dissertations that were also found in the study by Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2016).

#### Previous Studies

Some previous studies related to passive construction focused on different angles. For example Mohammed and Abdalhussein (2015)

focused on the errors in grammatical construction also on passive constructions in the academic writing written by the Iraqi students. Iraq. The errors were classified into such as Type of errors Number Passive auxiliary **Be** omission 30 Passive with auxiliary verb **Be** addition 30 Preposition confusion. This means that in the academic writing, passive construction is used but mostly for the students of non-English speakers finds it difficult.

Yet, Passive voice in research writing is often used. Another study which is more comprehensively by Staples et al., (2021), passive voice is also found in many academic writing, especially in Life and Physical sciences. More strikingly, the evidence as found in Bibe (2012), the passive voice patterns in academic writing that is “Be + third form of Verbs” was 90%. This indicates that passive voice in academic writing exists dominantly. Whether it is to avoid subjectivity by using passive voice or impersonality according to Flowerdew (2012) both passive and active can also be impersonal when the object is asserted not the researchers’ names.

Horbowicz et al., (2019) in their study, they analyzed the passive construction in Mainland Scandinavian languages. Based on their findings, two means of expressing the passive voice were indicated such as (1) morphological, the so-called s-passive and (2) the periphrastic passive. Further, they were both having full inflectional paradigms in all tenses in Swedish, whereas in Danish and Norwegian. They also found the passive voice only in the present tense and infinite verb forms. However, it can be interesting to see the controversies whether to use active or passive voice in academic writing. This controversy motivated the present study to do a research on passive voice that is in the methodology section of the research articles published in the research journals.

### 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study that analyses the texts in sub-genres of the methodology sections of research journal articles. These research journal articles (RAs) were taken purposively from 12 research journal articles published in the international journals. This can be referred to the previous studies related genre analysis with RAs such Lakic (2010), Hyland (2008), and Djuwari (2009). Therefore, the documents of the sub-genres were used for analysis. They were analyzed using the pattern of Passive Voice sentences. The data were collected and summarized based on the construction of the passive voice. From this analysis, it could also be found how many sentences or what percent of the sentences that are written or expressed by the authors in passive voice.

The passive voices were then selected according to the levels of passive voices such as (1) Phrases, (2) Clauses, and (3) Sentences. They were presented in tables then described and finally interpreted for inferences. Staples et al., (2021), Bibe (2012), and Horbowicz et al., (2019). All the data are represented in tables and interpreted based on the theoretical basis (Arifah et al., 2022). Numbers of the passive voice were counted and the percentage was determined. Finally, they were interpreted and inferred.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

As the objectives of this study, there are three levels of passive voice being analyzed. The data were taken from 12 sub-genres of Methodology sections of the 12 articles. These 12 articles are the articles that have been published in the international journals, especially in Education Field. First the passive voice of the sentence level, second the clause level, and third the phrase level (Celce-Murcia, 2002; Shaw, 2012; and Hyland, 2008)). These are presented in tables subsequently in Table 1.a, Table 2, and Table 3.a. The results can be seen in these three tables.

Table 1.a: Passive Voice of Sentence Levels

ARTICLE S	SENTENCE LEVEL	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The second part is a written test consisting of 25 pairs...</li> <li>2. This is verified by a high school English specialist from...</li> <li>3. The written test was given to all...</li> <li>4. No terms referring to the targeted constructions were mentioned in the test.</li> <li>5.. The test was also analyzed based on the criteria stipulated....</li> </ol>	5	12%
2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Grounded theory was chosen since it is...</li> <li>2. This approach was taken in order to reduce...</li> <li>3. At the time that the diary entries were posted,</li> <li>4. Subsequently, the data was analyzed using....</li> <li>5. It was used as a foundation for further...</li> <li>6. Each diary entry was “disassembled” by paragraph...</li> </ol>	6	14%
3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Results were also narrowed in ERIC within...</li> <li>2. Journals...in ERIC cannot be found via...</li> <li>3. A study is not correctly classified under...</li> <li>4. It cannot be found using...</li> <li>5. The incorrect classification of others is considered highly...</li> <li>6. the sample can be considered well-drawn ...</li> <li>7. and grades 1-12 were included...</li> </ol>	7	17%
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. processes/systems can be used to raise...</li> <li>2. The main reason articles were excluded from...</li> </ol>	2	5%
5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The statements in the survey were based on a 5-point Likert-type...</li> <li>2. The participants were asked to complete the survey...</li> <li>3. The data were analyzed through SPSS 22...</li> <li>4. One Way ANOVA tests were used to...</li> <li>5. of the variables were produced...</li> <li>6. The level of significance was taken as (...)</li> <li>7. Information has been given and those...</li> </ol>	7	17%
6		0	0 ***
7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Of the 72 studies, 17 were conducted in New Zealand...</li> <li>2. most studies were conducted in primary schools,...</li> <li>3. The results of this analysis were entered into an...</li> <li>4. An iterative checking process was then undertaken...</li> </ol>	4	10%

8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The studies we used were selected from...</li> <li>2. ... of professional development on student outcomes could be calculated...</li> <li>3. most studies were conducted in primary schools...</li> <li>4. The results of this analysis were entered...</li> </ol>	4	10%
9	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. This review was conducted on a broad literature...</li> <li>2. The eligibility process was conducted by the two authors</li> <li>3. The PRISMA framework was used initially for...</li> <li>4. ...but has also been used for reporting systematic reviews...</li> <li>5. EBSCO Host research website was used,...</li> <li>6. eleven academic and psychological were selected,...</li> <li>7. an examination and selection process was carried out...</li> <li>8. Papers were included if they met...</li> </ol>	8	19%
10	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. these very small scale research three questions was asked...</li> <li>2. Only qualitative methods were employed as...</li> <li>3. 5 open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire...</li> <li>4. These questions were given to 19 students at...</li> <li>5. the following three questions were not answered by everybody....</li> <li>6. the questions could be divided into three main areas...</li> </ol>	6	
11	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The study was conducted in three colleges ....</li> <li>2. They were requested to fill in the questionnaires distributed to them...</li> <li>3. A group of the respondent was interview to get information in-depth concerning the motivation to learn...</li> <li>4. The data were analyzed using presented and described ....</li> <li>5. Besides that, they were triangulated with the triangulated that is in the same field of applied linguistics...</li> <li>6. Inferences were done to get the conclusion related to...</li> <li>7. All the data were presented in tables and ...</li> <li>8. Data reduction related to the interviews was also done...</li> </ol>		

12	<p>1. This research was done to find out the influential factors in the learning process...</p> <p>2. The data were collected from...</p> <p>3. The multiple regressions were employed for the data analysis...</p> <p>4. The respondents were also given questionnaires concerning the questions about their motivation in learning the English language..</p> <p>5. Likert scale was employed in the questionnaire alternatives...</p>		
<b>TOTAL PASSIVE VOICE</b>		<b>55</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>4.6</b>	<b>4.6%</b>

As presented in Table 1.a, the author of article no1 expressed 5 passive voices. All these passive voices are without agent. The author of article no2 wrote 6 passive voices and all of them are also without agent. The next is the author no 3 who expressed 7 passive voices. The author of article no 4 only 2 passive voice, the author of article no 5 wrote 7 with 4 passive voices, the author of article no 8, with 4 passive voices, the author of article no 9 with 8 passive voices passive voices, followed by the author of article no 10 with 6passive voices, the author of article no 11 with 8 passive vices, and the author of article no 12 with 5 passive voices. The most strikingly, only one author of article no 6 who did not express any passive voice in the methodology section of the article.

In terms of avoiding the subjectivity, passive vice ii expressed or written without agent. This indicates that the 11 authors have

tried to avoid subjectivity by first of all using passive sentences and more clearly without the agents (Chan and Maglio, 2020). This can also be found in some grammar books dealing with reducing subjectivity using passive sentences (Celce-Murcia, 2002; Shaw, 2012). The authors can use passive without agents when expressing the topic being talked about, such as the research or the study, the method being used, and the like. On average among 12 authors, the use of passive voice is 46%, from the total passive voice being analyzed.

Unlike the 11 authors who used passive voice in their methodology sections of their research articles, the author no 6 did not use any passive voice at all. When it was analyzed, all of the sentences are expressed in active voices. Here are the examples of the sentences expressed by the author of article no 6 as in Table 1.b:

**Table 1. b Sentences Used by the Author with no Passive Voice.**

1	This paper offers a critical review of developments
2	It takes an inclusive view of...,
3	The concept reaches beyond the practice...

This author did not use personal pronoun “I” or “we” but he used the subject of “the study” and the pronoun of “it”. This is interesting because

the author did not use the personal pronoun of “I” or “we”. Yet, no passive voice is used at all.



**Table 2: Passive Voice of Clause Level**

ARTICLES	CLAUSE LEVEL	TOTAL	PERCENT
1	1. ... are those taught in high school...	1	9%
2		0	0
3	1. ...that is still used in the...	1	9%
4	1. how teaching and learning activities could be improved to... 2. The main reason articles were excluded from our review was...	2	18%
5		0	0
6		0	0
7	1. for inclusion needed to show some... 2. of leadership mentioned in each study...	2	18%
8	1.... from which leadership dimensions were derived1...	1	9%
9	1. this to 89 papers that were peer-reviewed for journals.... 2. ...that they were coded through...	2	18%
10		0	0
11	1. ....analyzed the data that were collected from... 2. which was related to...	2	18%
12		0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.9%</b>

In the clause level of passive voice, as presented in Table 3.a among 12 authors, 7 of them expressed passive verbal in the clause level while 5 of them did not. It indicates that passive voice or verbal are not expressed by the authors so frequently. This shows that their sentences

are not the complex sentences using clauses as the embedded sentences of the main sentences (Wiredu, 2012). Among the 7 authors who wrote their sentences with passive voice of the clause levels on average, it is still in a small number, which is only 0.9%

**Table 3a: Passive Voice of Phrase Level**

ARTICLES	PHRASE LEVEL	TOTAL	PERCENT
1	1. from the targeted construction, ... 2. the verbs provided, ... 3. Ordered randomly.... 4. The written test..	5	23%

	5 referring to the targeted constructions,,		
2	1. The language expressed in the diary entries... 2. These descriptors allowed for the data...	2	10%
3	1. disability-related studies... 2. articles published between 2000 and 2013... 3. selection criteria included the possibility of making...	3	13%
4		0	0
5	1. Multiple Intelligence Inventory” developed by...	1	10%
6	1. a critical review of developments geared towards... 2. Of the 72 studies, 17 were conducted in New Zealand...	2	10%
7		0	
8	1. Studies accepted for inclusion needed...	1	5%
9	1. a broad literature search designed to identify... 2. an agreement achieved for each paper...	2	10%
10		0	
11	1...the questionnaires distributed to the respondents were... 2. the data analyzed for the generalization... 3. The data triangulated with...	3	13%
12	1. ...as it was presented in the tables 2. the data processed using... 3. the data reduced for focusing on the research objectives and problems..	3	13%
	TOTAL	22	100
	AVERAGE	2	10%

Another interesting finding is that in terms of the passive voice of phrase level, there are 9 authors of the articles used it (Author no 1, author no 2, author no 3, author no 5, author no 6, author no 9, author no 11, and author no 12). Three authors did not use any passive voice (say passive verbal) in the phrase level as in Table 3. This can be stated that their sentences tend to be

simpler than those who used passive voice of the phrase level (Wiredu, 2012; Celce-Murcia, 2002; and Shaw, 2012).). The examples of the sentences used by the three authors (Author no 4, author no: 7, and author no 10) with no passive voice of the Phrase levels are such as in Table 3.b:

**Table 3. b Sentences Used by the authors without Passive Voice in Phrase Levels**

1	This workshop aimed to...
2	we then reported them at an interactive...
3	We inductively derived conclusions....
4	We analyzed these notes for...
5	not all students expressed clearly...

6	All students responded to...
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## 5. Conclusion

It can be inferred as the following, based on the results of the analysis. When looking at the sentence level, only one author did not express any passive voice in the methodology section of the research articles. The rest or in majority, the authors wrote the sentences in the methodology section using passive sentences. This indicates that passive voice or sentences are still dominant in academic writing. It can be for reducing subjectivity or asserting the topic or the object being talked about rather than the subject or the researcher.

The next inference is that, in the level of clause, passive voice seems to be implemented by some authors, majority of the authors still wrote some passive voices in the level of clause. So the passive voice of the level of phrases, the authors in majority still used it in their sentences in academic writing. However, the most important thing is that, to moderate the controversy of using passive or active in academic writing, it is not necessary to be taken into a serious problem. The most important thing is that the passive voices are still dominant, thus, it can be effectively and efficiently used for academic writing by the authors.

The limitation of this study is on the number of the sub-genre of the research articles (RAs) even though some previous studies could also purposively take the sample between 10 to 20 sub-genres. This study is a case study using the students in the class of Research Articles and Publication. For further research, it would be more interesting if the sub-genre used is not only in Methodology sections of research journal articles, but it can be in other sub-genre such as in introduction, conclusion, and discussion.

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