

# Good Writing Practice

## Grammatical misagreement in voice

Active voice verb, passive voice verb

### SECTION EDITOR



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### Introduction

**T**he distinction between the active and passive voice is that the subject acts by means of the active voice verb, and the subject is acted on by means of the passive voice verb.

The extensive usage of the passive voice in research writing probably results from a thematic subject-focused pattern (*the protein was isolated*) rather than an agent-subject focused narrative pattern (*we isolated the protein*). Such thematic focus facilitates inter-sentence continuity, because the subject can consistently be the *protein* (or an equivalent) rather than *we... we*, which becomes monotonous and egotistical.

The examples of voice misagreement are organised first according to journal article section (Experimental, Contextual) and second according to voice misagreement (active or passive).

### Experimental sections

#### Part 1 – Materials and Methods section: Method

##### **Example: Misagreement of active voice**

*Interviews focused on genetic, medical, and family history.*

##### **Revision**

*Interviews were focused on genetic, medical, and family history*

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### Notes

The usage of the active voice phrasal verb *focused on* with an abstract inanimate subject is a common distraction classifiable as a personification. Revision involves conversion into the passive voice. A classic example of personification is *this paper discusses*.

## Part 2 – Materials and Methods section: materials

### Example: Misagreement of passive voice

The system was consisted of six main features: user information, user profile management, query processor, SQL query generation, result refinement, and ontology management.

#### Revision 1

The system **consisted of** six main features: user information, user profile management, query processor, SQL query generation, result refinement, and ontology management.

#### Revision 2

The system comprised six main features: user information, user profile management, query processor, SQL query generation, result refinement, and ontology management.

#### Notes

Why does *was consisted of* sound awkward? Although *consisted of* is probably a phrasal transitive verb with the direct object *six main features*, usage of the passive voice is ungrammatical. In contrast, the active voice *consisted of* and *comprised* are grammatical.

## Part 3 – Results section: results statement

### Example: Misagreement of passive voice

The concentration of DHA was increased from the maternal to foetal liver.

#### Revision 1

DHA concentration **increased** from the maternal to foetal liver.

#### Revision 2

There was an **increased** DHA concentration from the maternal to foetal liver.

#### Notes

In the Example, it appears that the authors were responsible for the increase. That is, there is confusion reading *was increased* as a passive verb phrase or as a linking verb + adjectival past participle subject complement. The passive verb denotes an external action; the linking verb + past participle adjectival denotes an observation.

In Revision 1, usage of *increased* involves an intransitive verb. In Revision 2, the existential somewhat wordy *there is* structure is used. The shift is also from a narrative to a descriptive format, a format befitting an existential observation, which is appropriate for the Results section.

## Contextual sections

### Part 1 – Introduction section: Hypothesis

#### Example: Misagreement of active voice

$\beta$ -Catenin may involve early liver development.

#### Revision 1

$\beta$ -Catenin may **be involved in** early liver development.

#### Revision 2

**Early liver development may involve  $\beta$ -Catenin.**

#### Notes

In the Example, you can see the illogical relation conveyed by the active voice verb *involve* between the subject  *$\beta$ -catenin* and direct object *development*.

Revision 1 involves conversion into the passive voice; Revision 2, inversion of subject and direct object.

## Summary

Despite frequent usage of the passive voice, some impeded immediate comprehension distractions do occur. Most common, particularly by ESL (English as second language) writers, is an inverse misagreement between the subject and direct object. ( *$\beta$ -Catenin may involve early liver development*, instead of the inverse,  *$\beta$ -Catenin may be involved in early liver development*). ESL misusage is also common for transitive phrasal verbs such as *consists of* which seems awkward as a passive (*was consisted of*). As yet, there seems no explanation why some verbs are ungrammatical in the passive voice.

The revisions involve changing verb voice (active to passive or passive to active) or inversion of subject and direct object to correct for active voice misagreement.

## Schematised misagreement in voice – distractions and revisions

### Active voice misagreement

#### Materials and Methods section: method (Experimental #1)\*

Interviews focused on genetic, medical, and family history.

#### Transformation: active → passive voice

Interviews **were focused on** genetic, medical, and family history.

Introduction: hypothesis (Contextual #1)\*

$\beta$ -Catenin may involve early liver development.

#### Transformation: active → passive voice

$\beta$ -Catenin may **be involved in** early liver development.

#### Replacement: inversion between subject and direct object

**Early liver development may involve  $\beta$ -catenin.**

### Passive Voice Misagreement

#### Materials and Methods section: method (Experimental #2)\*

The system was consisted of six main features: user information, user profile management, query processor, SQL query generation, result refinement, and ontology management.

#### Transformation: passive → active voice

The system **consisted of** six main features: user information, user profile management, query processor, SQL query generation, result refinement, and ontology management.

The system **comprised** six main features: user information, user profile management, query processor, SQL query generation, result refinement, and ontology management.

#### Results section: results statement (Experimental #3)\*

The concentration of DHA was increased from the maternal to foetal liver.

#### Transformation: passive → active voice

The concentration of DHA **increased** from the maternal to foetal liver.

#### Transformation: narrative → descriptive pattern

There was an **increased** DHA concentration from the maternal to foetal liver.

\*The part number in the Experimental or Contextual section