ACTIVE VS PASSIVE VOICE

Active voice: subject of the sentence performs the action

e.g. The entire class ate the pizza.

Passive voice: subject of the sentence receives the action

e.g. The pizza was eaten by the entire class.

Most writers (including those marking your assignments) prefer the active voice, especially in non-scientific writing, because it is less wordy and often provides clearer meaning. Yet, the passive voice is helpful when:

- it is not clear, or not important to know, who is performing the action in a sentence.

  e.g. The pizza was eaten. This sentence implies that someone did in fact eat the pizza, but the author of the statement is unsure, or doesn’t care, who actually ate the pizza.

- an action was completed by an object rather than a person. For instance, in many scientific disciplines a piece of equipment may be used to perform a task.

  e.g. DNA samples were sequenced using the Turbo Genome sequencing machine.

As in the above examples, in many scientific disciplines the agent of an action is often an object or unimportant; writers in these disciplines have therefore traditionally used the passive voice. More recently, though, many scientific disciplines have adopted the use of the active voice because it is so much clearer. If you’re not sure which voice to use, take a look at examples of writing in your discipline and ask your instructor.

For more on active and passive voice, including tips for changing passive to active voice, visit the Dalhousie Writing Centre, or go online to the Purdue Online Writing Lab:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1/

For interactive exercises dealing with active and passive voice, visit http://www.englisch-hilfen.de/en/complex_tests/passive1/index.php