

Section 11: Grammar

11.1 Passive and Active Voice

Active and passive voice have distinct purposes. Active voice is more direct and often preferred for nonscientific writing. In choosing between active and passive voice, a writer is choosing sentence structure that emphasizes either the doer (active voice) or what is being acted upon (passive). The choice of voice does not need to be uniform within a document; rather a mix of voices may best serve the author's purpose.

Use: (Passive) Over the last five years, research has been conducted on the calving success of the Porcupine caribou herd. (Followed by the Active voice) In 2003, ADF&G increased the bag limit for hunters.

a. Active voice

Active structure emphasizes and identifies who is doing the action and places the doer toward the beginning of the sentence. What is being acted upon is moved toward the end of the sentence (and becomes the object of the subject).

Active: The deputy commissioner approved the new training policy. [doer emphasis]

Passive: The new training policy was approved by the commissioner. [action emphasis]

The new training policy was approved. [action emphasis]

Active: We discussed salmon escapement at the meeting. [doer emphasis]

Passive: Salmon escapement was discussed at the meeting. [action emphasis]

Active: Dr. Gomez, a zoologist from the University of Alaska–Fairbanks, directed the physiology test. [doer emphasis]

Passive: The physiology test was completed at the University of Alaska. [action emphasis]

To find and consider rewriting passive sentences to make it active, look for a verb (*is, are, was, were*) next to an action word (*found, made, done, heard, recommend*) usually ending in *ed, de, nd, ne, or rd*.

b. Passive voice

Passive structure is used to emphasize what is being done and to drop mention of the doer. Scientific writing often uses passive structure in order to emphasize the action and process rather than who performed the action. Passive structure allows writers to reverse the nouns at the beginning and end of a sentence (the object becomes the subject). In scientific writing, the action or process is often more important than who performed the action.

Passive: Subsistence and personal use harvests have been estimated by means of returned permits. [action emphasis]

Active: ADF&G staff estimated subsistence and personal use harvests by means of returned permits. [doer emphasis]

Passive: Surveys have been conducted documenting subsistence harvests in the area. [action emphasis]

Active: ADF&G Divisions of Subsistence, Sport Fish, and Commercial Fisheries, and National Marine Fisheries Service have conducted surveys of subsistence harvest in the area. [doer emphasis]

When leaving out the doer of an action, make sure that it does not result in an awkward or misleading sentence:

Use: Using binoculars, scientists observed caribou.

Avoid: The caribou were observed using binoculars

11.2 Subject–Verb Agreement

Singular and plural subjects require singular and plural agreement with the verb, but agreement can be tricky when there is a prepositional phrase (of biomass; without walls) between the subject and the verb. This often makes it difficult to identify which noun or pronoun is actually the subject of the sentence.

Use: The results (subject) of the test (prepositional phrase) were (verb) unexpected.

One of the best ways to distinguish subject and verb, and therefore their agreement, is to take out the intervening phrases. If the sentence still reads correctly, then you have agreement.

Use: The results (subject) were (verb) unexpected.

If the prepositional phrase has a noun that is singular while the subject is plural, it can get confusing. There are basically two types of nouns:

1. *Noncount nouns* are words that generally are not counted, such as the words *salt*, *butter*, *soil*, and *biomass*; they are usually singular.
2. *Count nouns* are countable, such as *book*, *word*, and *computer*; they are either singular or plural.

We offer four rules to eliminate some of the hardships of subject–verb agreement:

1. Units of measurement take singular verbs because they are thought of as distinct, single units.

Use: Four feet of line was tangled.

2. The phrases *a number* and *a total* are usually plural; however, *the number* and *the total* are usually singular.

Is it *a total of 270,000 salmon* **was harvested** or **were harvested**?

Use: A total of 270,000 salmon were harvested.
 A number of salmon harvested and discarded were not included.
 The total number of salmon harvested was 270,000.
 There were 270,000 salmon harvested.
 The total harvest was 270,000 salmon.

3. Noncount nouns are generally singular.

Use: MS222 was added.
 The biomass was stored.

4. Recast passive sentences to active to make agreement even easier. See Section 11.1 Passive and Active Voice for more information on passive sentences.

Passive: Two feet of soil was taken from the site.
 Active: DEC took 2 ft of soil from the site.

11.3 Bias-Free and Gender-Neutral Language

The department uses bias-free and gender-neutral language. Documents should be carefully reviewed for biased language. The phrase *gender-neutral* refers to works that make no reference at all to gender and allow us to avoid gender stereotyping. When naming a job or role, avoid the use of compound terms ending in *man* or *woman* unless the term refers to a specific person whose gender is known (for example: Chairman David Jones, Chairwoman Joan Smith...).

| Avoid Using | Instead Use |
|-------------------------|---|
| chairman (as a default) | chairman or chairwoman (if known); chairperson, chair (if unknown) |
| craftsman | artisan |
| congressman | senator/representative/member of Congress |
| fireman | firefighter |
| fisherman ¹ | fisher (the standard term used in the context of subsistence fishing activities), or angler (the standard term within the context of sport fishing) |
| manmade | manufactured, artificial |
| man-hour, man-month | worker-hour, worker-month, angler-hour, hunter-hour, hunting-hour |
| manpower | workforce, personnel, human resources, staff |
| policeman | police officer |
| sportsman | sportsperson, outdoor recreationist |
| waiter/waitress | waitstaff |
| workman | worker |

¹ *Fisherman/men* is the historically-used term and is acceptable. However, writers should strive to provide gender-neutral fish harvester terms when possible. Consider using gillnetter, seiner, troller, etc. to identify commercial fishing parties, and angler instead of fisherman when referencing sport fishing activities. Fisher is the standard term used in the Division of Subsistence.