

# UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

www.csulb.edu/uwc  
(562) 985 – 5162  
SSC

stated, sentences that contain the passive voice are often too wordy and lack focus, which makes it difficult for your reader to understand your main point. Active voice is usually more direct and livelier while passive voice is less direct and more descriptive.

The active voice is preferred in most, but not all, academic writing. Look out for forms of the verb *be* (be, am, is, are, was, were, being, been) which frequently signal the passive voice. These words do have legitimate uses, but if you can use an active verb instead, you should.

## Example 1

*Passive Voice:* My cell phone was misplaced by me.

This sentence is overly wordy

*Active Voice:* The nutritionist claims that childhood obesity is the result of shorter lunch breaks.

## Example 4

*Passive Voice:* Mistakes were made.

You've probably heard this sentence in apologies from public figures (Nixon). Note that it does not state who made mistakes, but uses passive voice as a rhetorical device to avoid placing blame on a particular person. In the active voice, it is obvious who is at fault.

*Active Voice:* We made mistakes.

Copyright (C) 2016. All rights reserved.

This handout is part of a library of instructional materials used in California State University, Long Beach's writing center, the Writer's Resource Lab. Educators and students are welcome to distribute copies as long as they do so with attribution to all organizations and authors. Commercial distribution is prohibited.

**Practice:** Whether to write in the active or passive voice is a matter of choice and style. Generally, academic writing is most effective and clear in the active voice. You can tell that you overuse the passive voice when you proofread a paragraph and discover your sentences have wordy, complicated expressions. Look through an essay and see how often verb phrases with “to be” appear throughout your writing. Be creative and learn to experiment with new arrangements of words; try to choose verbs that convey direct meaning and that can

Copyright (C) 2016. All rights reserved.

This handout is part of a library of instructional materials used in California State University, Long Beach’s writing center, the Writer’s Resource Lab. Educators and students are welcome to distribute copies as long as they do so with attribution to all organizations and authors. Commercial distribution is prohibited.