

*A writer can arrange any given sentence in a number of different ways.*

*Any given sentence can be arranged in a number of different ways by a writer.*

These two sentences say the same thing. The first one uses passive voice, and the second one uses active voice. While passive structures have their place and can offer variety to writing, active structures should dominate most types of writing for reasons that will be explained later. For now, how do you tell if your writing is active or passive?

First of all, you must be able to identify the actor (subject) and action (verb) in your sentence. If you need help with this, see the Online Writing Center document on sentences and fragments.

*A writer can arrange any given sentence in a number of different ways.*

"A writer" is the actor and "arrange" is the action in the above sentence. Notice that the actor precedes the action and that the actor does (completes) the action. That tells you that this sentence is written in the active voice.

*Any given sentence can be arranged in a number of different ways by a writer.*

In this version of the sentence, the actor has not changed. "A writer" is still the one who is doing something. The action (verb) has changed slightly, however. The verb "arrange" has been put in past tense ("arranged") and preceded by a helping verb ("be"). In this sentence, the action precedes the actor, and the actor is not doing the verb (i.e. completing the action expressed by the verb). In other words, the writer is not the one doing the arranging. That tells you that this sentence is written in passive voice.

So, what is it that makes active voice better than passive voice in most cases? The answers are clarity and brevity. Active sentence structures tend to be clearer because the actor "does" the action. It's usually quite easy to locate the actor in an active sentence. With a passive structure, it can be harder to do so.

The other advantage of active voice is that it will almost always be briefer.

*A writer can arrange any given sentence in a number of different ways. (13 words)*

*Any given sentence can be arranged in a number of different ways by the writer. (15 words)*

While two words may not seem like much, if your document is loaded with passive structures, that can add up to a lot of extra words. To learn more about the value of brevity, read the Online Writing Center document on conciseness, and look at #9 for another example of passive vs. active voice.