Passive Voice

Some instructors at VCC require that lab reports be written in the passive voice. In scientific reports, the emphasis is on the action not on the person performing the action. Experiments are supposed to be reproducible by anyone, so the experimenter is not important to the results — though some modern scientists disagree with this philosophy. This is why reports are sometimes written in the passive voice. Using the passive voice focuses the attention on the action (the experiment and the results) rather than on the doer (you).

A sentence is in the **active voice** if the subject of the sentence performs the action:

**Active:** *Ryan poured the hydrochloric acid into the beaker.*

Who did the pouring? The subject, Ryan, did.

A sentence is in the **passive voice** if the object of the action (receives the action) is the subject of the sentence.

**Passive:** *The hydrochloric acid was poured into the beaker by Ryan.*

Who did the pouring? Ryan did, but the hydrochloric acid is now the subject of the sentence. The hydrochloric acid got poured.

Notice that the verb in the passive sentence used a form of “to be” (is, are, was, were, can be, etc.) followed by the past participle of the verb. If it’s relevant, the doer can be indicated with the word *by*, but the doer is usually omitted altogether in lab reports. The sentence will still make sense:

**Passive:** *The hydrochloric acid was poured into the beaker.*

You should find out from your instructor whether you need to use passive voice in your lab reports.
EXERCISES

A. Each of these sentences is in the active voice. Rewrite them in the passive voice, if appropriate:

1) I weighed out 5 g of sodium chloride.

2) We observed a pink colour at the titration endpoint.

3) The cart collided with the end of the track.

4) We examined the sample through the microscope at the 10X setting.

5) I compared the colours of the solutions with the samples at the front of the lab.

6) The fern grew 8 cm during the two weeks.

7) After we stirred the mixture, we pipetted 5 mL into each beaker.

8) The average value for the class was 13.7 kg.

9) I released the weight, and Daniel measured how long it took the weight to drop.

SOLUTIONS

A. (1) Five grams of sodium chloride were weighed out.
(2) A pink colour was observed at the titration endpoint.
(3) Passive voice is not appropriate here.
(4) The sample was examined through the microscope at the 10X setting.
(5) The colours of the solutions were compared with the samples at the front of the lab.
(6) Passive voice is not appropriate here.
(7) After the mixture was stirred, 5 mL was pipetted into each beaker.
(8) Passive voice is not appropriate here.
(9) The weight was released, and the time it took to drop was measured.