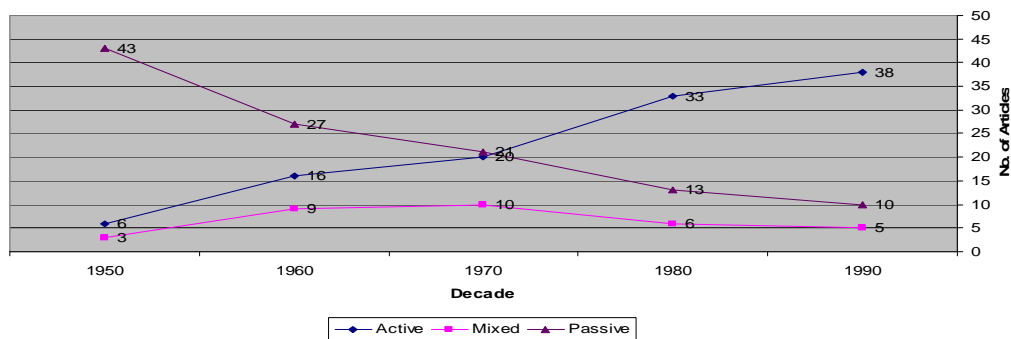


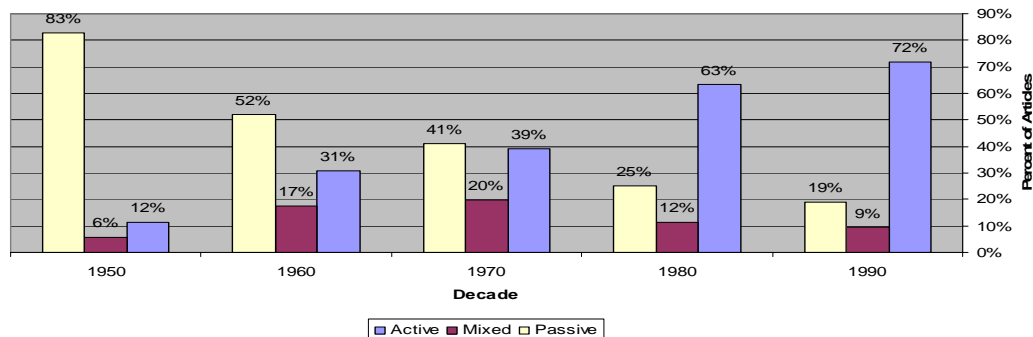
Trends in Active and Passive Voice Use in Science Reports

Summary: The class collectively gathered data on numerous science articles published after 1950 and before 2000 to observe trends in the use of active, passive and mixed voice in reporting. Our efforts were gathered together to build a more substantial and accurate representation of the time period. Results from this showed that the passive voice was being used most frequently by authors until about the 1970s when a reversal occurred and active voice became more favored. Since then, the active voice has been the increasingly dominant style used in scientific reporting, which also reflects the present-day expectations of the science community. One of the reasons for this change is because “by using the passive voice and addressing the reader in the third person, the writer distances himself or herself from the reader and obscures his or her own identity” (Cilengir 1992). Another reason is because many feel that passive voice makes an article unnecessarily difficult to read, which is supported by blogger John Timmer’s (2010) statement: “Most of us were scientists writing like scientists, with passive voice and elaborate, carefully constructed paragraphs. It was pretty awful.”

Methods & Results: Using the JSTOR online database, I selected two random science articles from each decade from the 1950s to the year 2000 and, after reading the first few paragraphs, made a determination about which voice was being employed by the author. As a final exercise, I chose one of these articles and rewrote it from passive voice to active voice. My fellow classmates followed this same procedure and all of our individual recordings were combined into a spreadsheet to tally and organize the data. This produced the following timeline which details the number of articles using active, passive or mixed voice, by decade.



Our results indicate that in the 1950s, 12% of reports used active voice while 83% used passive. In the 1970s the percentages for both were almost the same at ~39%. Finally, by the 1990s the trend was on its way to reversing completely with 72% using active voice and only 19% using passive.



References:

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- Timmer, J., 2010. *On the Origin of Science Writers* [Online] (Updated 29 July 2010) Available at: <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/notrocketscience/2010/07/29/on-the-origin-of-science-writers/> [Accessed 28 August 2011]