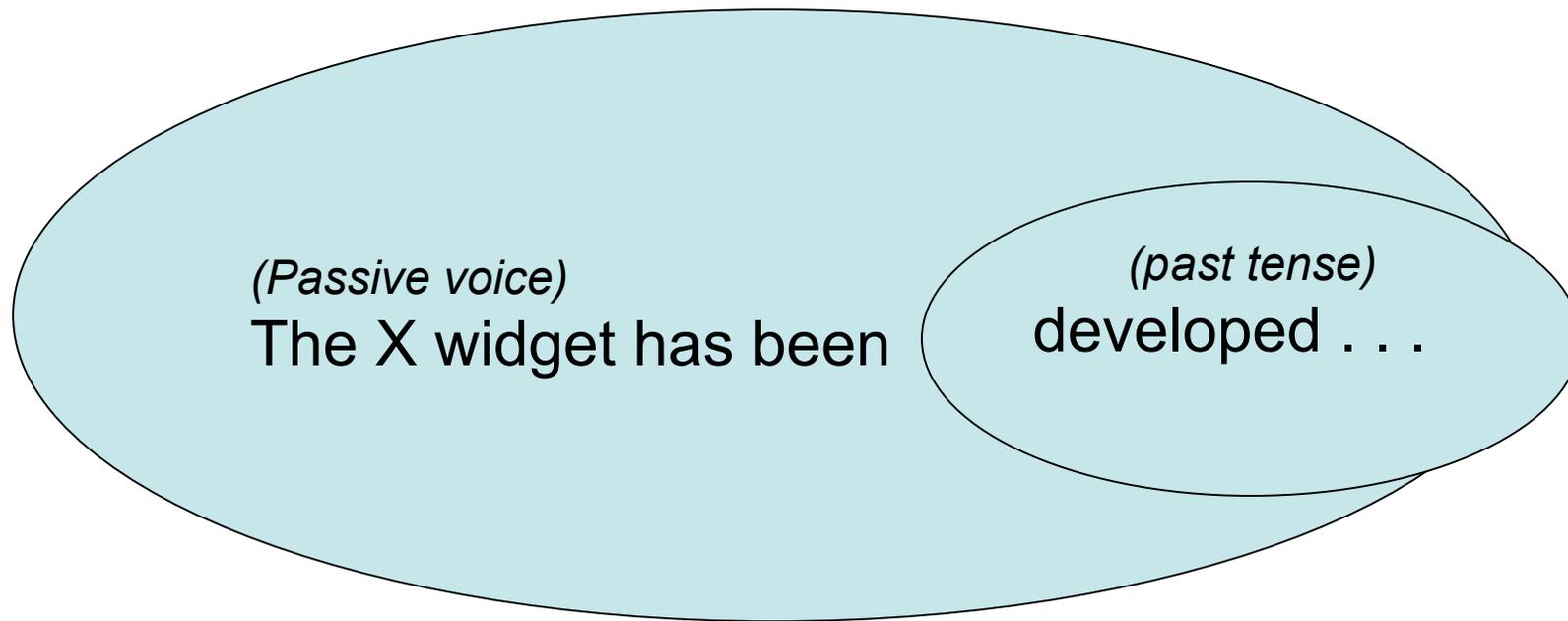


# Using Active and Passive Voice

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Passive voice is not the same thing as past tense, but it does sometime employ past tense.



*Passive voice, present tense:*

The X widget is being developed today.

## What is the difference between active and passive voice?

- Active voice emphasizes the *person or agent* doing the action in the sentence.

***Dr. Teale completed*** the field study yesterday.

- Passive voice emphasizes the person or thing which was acted upon -- and the real subject doing the action is either missing or delayed. (notice “to be” form with the verb)

***The field study was completed*** yesterday [by Dr. Teale].

## Why do some readers prefer active voice?

- Active voice emphasizes the agent of the action, and is thus more humanizing (in showing who is responsible), more direct, and often less wordy.
- Human agents engage readers.
- Sometimes passive voice can create confusion, especially if the person doing the action is missing from the sentence.

Some audiences and situations still demand passive voice:

- Many technical professionals prefer reports written in the passive voice, to emphasize work done, not the people doing the work.
  - Example: “Two mechanical devices have been developed to offer a non-biological solution to congestive heart failure: the ventricular assist device (VAD) and the total artificial heart (TAH).”

Companies or supervisors may have political or legal reasons for using passive voice in personnel matters.

- In order to continue with quality programming and yet meet new budget constraints for fiscal year 2006, three positions in this office have been eliminated.

For technical writing, consider choosing both active and passive voice to achieve variety, fluidity, and emphasis.

- See handout showing UW CoE professors using active and passive voice interchangeably.

See handout from Eric Hellstrom's report to the Office of Naval Research:

- Eric encouraged his students to use I or we when describing their work.
- His report has an “active”, engaged quality: it emphasizes work he is actively engaged in -- probably a nice emphasis for a grant agency to see.

## **Final thoughts: When people ask for passive voice, they might be meaning -- avoid the use of “I” or “we”**

- Some profs are downright adamant that these words should be avoided.
- I like “I” or “we” for discussion of goals, discussion of judgments, conclusions, and recommendations.
- Some think it makes a technical document sound too subjective: but I think good technical documents do have a subjective quality, and that should be owned.