



Describing methods

Extra practice in passive, past, and clear sequence

The methods section tells the reader how you did your research. It must be clear and detailed enough for another researcher to reproduce it. Academic methods writing often uses the passive voice for procedures, the simple past for completed steps, a clear sequence, and names the tool or software clearly, often with "using".

1. Passive voice when the procedure is the focus. "the samples were heated" rather than "I heated the samples"
2. Simple past for completed steps. were measured, was recorded, were divided
3. Clear sequence. First, Before, Once, After, Finally
4. Name the tool or software clearly, often with "using". measured using a digital scale; analysed using SPSS

SEE — *choose the academic methods version*

Underline the version in correct methods style.

1. (I collected the data / The data were collected) over six weeks.
2. The samples (are stored / were stored) at -20°C.
3. The temperature (was measured using / was measured with the help of) a digital probe.
4. (Prior to / Because of) testing, the equipment was calibrated.

TRY — *make each sentence passive and past*

Rewrite each personal sentence in academic methods style.

5. We recruited thirty participants by email.

> -----

6. I analysed the results using SPSS.

> -----

7. We heated the solution to 90°C.

> -----

ACT — *add a sequence word*

Join or rewrite each pair so the order is clear. Use First, Before, Once, After, or Finally.

8. The samples were labelled. The samples were frozen. (labelling came first)

> -----

9. Ethical approval was obtained. The interviews began. (approval came first)

> -----

10. The data were cleaned. The data were analysed. (cleaning came first)

> -----

ACT — *name the tool or software*

Complete each sentence by naming a tool or software with “using”.

11. The interviews were recorded -----

> -----

12. The statistics were calculated -----

> -----

13. The images were captured -----

> -----

REFLECT — *judge the three versions*

Three versions of one methods step. Mark the best, then say what is wrong with the other two.

_____ a. I measure the temperature with the help of a thermometer.

_____ b. We measured the temperature with a thermometer.

_____ c. The temperature was measured using a thermometer.

Best: _____ What is wrong with the other two?

> -----



Describing methods

Model answers and short explanations

SEE – choose the academic version

1. The data were collected – passive, not personal.
2. were stored – simple past, for a completed step.
3. was measured using – 'using' names the tool clearly; 'with the help of' is wordy.
4. Prior to – a sequence word; 'because of' gives a reason, not an order.

TRY – make it passive and past (sample answers)

5. Thirty participants were recruited by email.
6. The results were analysed using SPSS.
7. The solution was heated to 90°C.

ACT – add a sequence word (sample answers)

8. After the samples were labelled, they were frozen.
9. Before the interviews began, ethical approval was obtained. (or: Prior to the interviews ...)
10. After the data were cleaned, they were analysed.

ACT – name the tool or software (sample answers)

11. ... recorded using a digital audio recorder.
12. ... calculated using SPSS.
13. ... captured using a confocal microscope.

REFLECT – judge the three versions

Best: c – passive, simple past, tool named clearly with 'using'.

a is weakest; b is acceptable in some fields. 'a' is personal ('I'), present tense ('measure'), and wordy ('with the help of'). 'b' is better and may be fine in some contexts, but it is more personal than the target methods style ('we measured').

Source note. All sentences in this worksheet are original, written for teaching. The methods conventions are informed by the Academic Phrasebank (John Morley, University of Manchester, 2023), 'Describing Methods'. No part of the Phrasebank PDF is reproduced here.