

Explanations

Uses

- Transitive and intransitive verbs

Only verbs with an object (transitive verbs) can be made passive.

*They sent the letter. The letter **was sent**.*

They arrived late. (cannot be made passive)

Verbs with both direct and indirect objects can be made passive in two ways:

*They sent me the letter. I **was sent** the letter.*

***The letter was sent** to me.*

Some transitive verbs cannot be made passive in some uses. For example *like* and *love*.

I like this place. (a passive form of this sentence is not possible)

- Focus on important information

By placing the object at the beginning of the sentence, the passive can change the focus of interest in a sentence.

*United **were beaten** by Arsenal. (we are more interested in United)*

The passive is used in a variety of contexts. Notice how the agent (person who does the action) is unimportant, unknown or clear from the situation.

Impersonal statements *Students **are asked** not to smoke.*

When the agent is unknown *My bike **has been stolen!***

(Here we could say *Someone/They have stolen my bike.*)

When the agent is obvious *Mr Jones **will be arrested**.*

How something was done *The box **was opened** with a knife.*

Reporting verbs

- The passive is often used with *say, believe, understand, know* and similar verbs used in reporting speech to avoid an impersonal *they* or *people*.

People say that John Wilson lives in New York.

*John Wilson **is said** to live in New York.*

- Other verb forms can also be reported in this way.

They say John Wilson is travelling in Africa.

*John Wilson **is said to be travelling** in Africa.*

People say John Wilson has arrived in Australia.

*John Wilson **is said to have arrived** in Australia.*

Have/Get something done

- When someone does some work for us, we can use *have something done*.

*Last year I **had** new tiles **put** on the roof.*

*I'm **having** my hair **cut** this afternoon.*

- The same construction can describe bad luck caused by an unspecified person.

*Peter **had** his car **stolen** last week.*

*And then he **had** his leg **broken** playing football.*

- Using *get* instead of *have* in the examples in paragraph 1 above would be more informal.

Using *get* can also suggest managing to do something difficult.

*It was difficult but we **got** the painting **done** in the end.*

Needs doing

This is an idiomatic way of expressing a passive sentence where a thing or person needs some kind of action.

*The floor is filthy. It **needs to be cleaned**.*

*The floor is filthy. It **needs cleaning**.*

Verbs and prepositions

The preposition stays with the verb in a passive sentence.

*People **shouted at** the Prime Minister during his speech.*

*The Prime Minister **was shouted at** during his speech.*

Other problems

- *Be born* is a passive form but does not have an obvious passive meaning.

*I **was born** near Kyoto.*

- *Make* (when meaning *force*) is followed by *to* in the passive.

They made David work hard.

*David **was made to** work hard.*

- Because the agent is unimportant, unknown or obvious, it is often not included. If we want to say who does the action we use *by*.

This letter was delivered this morning.

*This letter was delivered this morning **by** courier.*

Practice

1 Underline the verb forms which are not possible.

- a) My car has being stolen.
- b) Jack was borned on a Thursday.
- c) Then I realised that none of the guests had been sent an invitation.
- d) Mary's car is being serviced today.
- e) Your order will been sent as soon as possible.
- f) The hole in the road was being repaired when I came home.
- g) This swimming pool is used by over a thousand people each week.
- h) When was this church built?
- i) An address is writing on the back of the envelope.
- j) Customers are request to ask for a receipt.

2 Underline the most suitable verb form in each sentence.

- a) Their new house hasn't been finished/wasn't finished yet.
- b) The robbers were arrested/have been arrested as soon as they left the bank.
- c) Sue told us her baby is born/had been born two weeks earlier than expected.
- d) If there is too much snow, the match has been cancelled/will be cancelled.
- e) By the time we got there, the rain had stopped/had been stopped.
- f) When were you told/have you been told about the new rules?
- g) Most of the passengers were swimming/were swum easily to the shore.
- h) The winning horse was ridden/was riding by Pat Murphy.
- i) I looked again for the old man, but he was vanished/had vanished.
- j) I don't think that you will be asked/are being asked to show your passport.

3 Put each verb in brackets into a suitable passive form.

- a) I'm sorry, madam, but this carpet (already sell) has already been sold.
- b) The old house on the corner (knock down) last year.
- c) When exactly (John give) his prize?
- d) Most people agree that America (not discover) by Christopher Columbus.
- e) All complaints about products (deal with) by our customer services department.
- f) Police confirmed that the murder weapon (since discover) in a nearby lake.
- g) It (announce) yesterday that the government has decided not to raise income tax.
- h) Good news! I (ask) to take over as the new manager.
- i) I don't believe that this play (write) by Shakespeare.
- j) Ann really likes (invite) to dinner parties.

4 Rewrite each sentence, putting the verb in *italics* in the passive where possible. Do you need to mention the agent?

a) I really *like* this hotel.

..... *not possible*

b) Jane *won* the poetry competition.

..... *The poetry competition was won by Jane.*

c) Peter's new car *cost* over £20,000.

.....

d) Martin always *wears* casual clothes.

.....

e) One of our visitors *lost* this cigarette lighter.

.....

f) They *haven't decided* the exact time of the match yet.

.....

g) Most of the guests *had left* the hotel by midday.

.....

h) Some parents *read* to their children every night.

.....

i) This bike *belongs* to my sisters.

.....

j) People *ate* most of the food at the party.

.....



5 Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given. You must use between two and five words, including the word given.

- a) Last Thursday we appointed a new marketing manager.
was
 A new *marketing manager was appointed* last Thursday.
- b) Smith Ltd are supplying our company with furniture.
supplied
 Our company by Smith Ltd.
- c) William the Conqueror built the castle in the 11th century.
by
 The castle William the Conqueror in the 11th century.
- d) No decision has yet been made.
decided
 Nothing yet.
- e) People believe that someone murdered Jenkins.
was
 It murdered.
- f) Your hair needs cutting.
get
 You ought cut.
- g) The police were following the suspects.
were
 The suspects police.
- h) No-one has seen Peter since the day of the party.
been
 Peter the day of the party.
- i) We put up a notice about the trip on the notice board yesterday.
was
 A notice up on the notice board yesterday.
- j) People think that an apple a day is good for you.
to
 An apple a day for you.

6 Rewrite each sentence so that it contains a form of *have something done*. Do not include the agent.

a) A painter painted our house last month.

We had our house painted last month.

b) The hairdresser is cutting my hair this afternoon.

c) Someone has stolen my motorbike.

d) The dentist has taken out all of Ricky's teeth.

e) I haven't been to the car-wash for a long time.

f) The men are coming to put in the new central heating on Saturday.

g) Someone broke Harry's nose in a fight.

h) Isn't it time someone fixed your television?

7 Rewrite each sentence so that it contains a passive form, and does not contain the words in *italics*.

a) *Apparently*, Freddie has a wife in Scotland.

Freddie is said to have a wife in Scotland.

b) *Nobody* knows *anything* about Brenda's family.

c) *People* think that *someone* started the fire deliberately.

d) You should *ask* a doctor to see to that cut.

e) *People* say that Chris was in the army.

f) My trousers *need* to be pressed before I leave.

g) *No-one* has signed this letter.

h) Mary's hair still *needs* cutting.

- 8** Look carefully at each line. Some of the lines are correct, and some have a word which should not be there. Tick each correct line. If a line has a word which should not be there, write the word in the space.

Opening of new Gulliver Sports Centre

The Gulliver Sports Centre, which has been completely rebuilt, was been reopened yesterday by the Minister of Sport. The building it was originally used to as a market, but was sold to Fairdene Council in 1981, and it then converted into a sports hall. Local schools were played football and basketball indoors, and keep-fit classes were held there. In 1990 the hall was damaged when by a fire which was broke out in the heating system. The hall could not be used, and remained empty while discussions continued about its future. It was then and decided that the hall would to be rebuilt, and an appeal for money was launched. Two years ago a local businessman offered to pay for the building work, and plans were drawn up. The new hall is includes a swimming pool, running track and other sports facilities which can be used by anyone in the Fairdene area. The Minister was made a speech in which she congratulated everyone involved.

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Key points

- 1 Not all verbs can be made passive. You can check in a dictionary whether the verb is transitive or intransitive.
- 2 The agent is only included if this information is needed.
- 3 Passive forms are often used to give an impersonal view.
- 4 When we change from passive to active the meaning changes slightly. In particular, the focus of interest changes. A passive form may be more suitable in some contexts but unsuitable in others.
- 5 Passive forms tend to be used more often in writing, especially in scientific and technical language.

→ SEE ALSO

Grammar 10: Consolidation 2

The Passive Voice

Let's look at this sentence:

- I drank two cups of coffee.

This is an **active** sentence and it has the subject first (the person or thing that does the verb), followed by the verb, and finally the object (the person or thing that the action happens to).

So, in this example, the subject is 'I', the verb is 'drank' and the object is 'two cups of coffee'.

But, we don't always need to make sentences this way. We might want to put the object first, or perhaps we don't want to say who did something. This can happen for lots of reasons (see the explanation further down the page). In this case, we can use a **passive**, which puts the object first:

- Two cups of coffee were drunk (we can add 'by me' if we want, but it isn't necessary).

How to make the Passive in English

We make the passive by putting the verb 'to be' into whatever tense we need and then adding the past participle. For regular verbs, we make the past participle by adding 'ed' to the infinitive. So 'play' becomes 'played'.

Tense	Active	Passive
present simple	I make a cake.	A cake is made (by me).
present continuous	I am making a cake.	A cake is being made (by me).
past simple	I made a cake.	A cake was made (by me).
past continuous	I was making a cake.	A cake was being made (by me).
present perfect	I have made a cake.	A cake has been made (by me).
present perfect continuous	I have been making a cake.	A cake has been being made (by me).
past perfect	I had made a cake.	A cake had been made (by me).
future simple	I will make a cake.	A cake will be made (by me).
future perfect	I will have made a cake.	A cake will have been made (by me).

Verbs with two objects

Some verbs that have two objects can make two different active sentences, and so two different passive sentences too. For example, the verb 'give' is like this:

- Active: He gave me the book / He gave the book to me.

You can choose either of the two objects to be the subject of the passive sentence.

- Passive: I was given the book (by him)/ The book was given to me (by him).

Other verbs like this are: ask, offer, teach, tell, lend, promise, sell, throw.

The passive in subordinate clauses

You can make the passive in a subordinate clause that has a subject and a normal conjugated verb. This is really the same as a normal passive.

- Active: I thought that Mary had kissed John.
- Passive: I thought that John had been kissed by Mary.
- Active: He knew that people had built the church in 1915.
- Passive: He knew that the church had been built in 1915.

You can also make the passive using a passive gerund or a passive infinitive in the same place as a normal gerund or infinitive.

- The child loves being cuddled.
- She would like to be promoted.

When should we use the passive?

1) When we want to change the focus of the sentence:

- The Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. (We are more interested in the painting than the artist in this sentence)

2) When who or what causes the action is unknown or unimportant or obvious or 'people in general':

- He was arrested (obvious agent, the police).
- My bike has been stolen (unknown agent).
- The road is being repaired (unimportant agent).
- The form can be obtained from the post office (people in general).

3) In factual or scientific writing:

- The chemical is placed in a test tube and the data entered into the computer.

4) In formal writing instead of using someone/ people/ they (these can be used in speaking or informal writing):

- The brochure will be finished next month.

5) In order to put the new information at the end of the sentence to improve style:

- Three books are used regularly in the class. The books were written by Dr. Bell. ('Dr. Bell wrote the books' sound clumsy)

6) When the subject is very long:

- I was surprised by how well the students did in the test. (More natural than: 'how well the students did in the test surprised me')

Exercise on Passive Voice - Simple Present

Rewrite the sentences in passive voice.

1. He opens the door. -
2. We set the table. -
3. She pays a lot of money. -
4. I draw a picture. -
5. They wear blue shoes. -
6. They don't help you. -
7. He doesn't open the book. -
8. You do not write the letter. -
9. Does your mum pick you up? -
10. Does the police officer catch the thief? -

Exercise on Passive Voice - Simple Past

Rewrite the sentences in passive voice.

1. She sang a song. -
2. Somebody hit me. -
3. We stopped the bus. -
4. A thief stole my car. -
5. They didn't let him go. -
6. She didn't win the prize. -
7. They didn't make their beds. -
8. I did not tell them. -
9. Did you tell them? -
10. Did he send the letter? -

Exercise on Passive Voice - Future I

Rewrite the sentences in passive voice.

1. Jane will buy a new computer. -
2. Her boyfriend will install it. -
3. Millions of people will visit the museum. -
4. Our boss will sign the contract. -
5. You will not do it. -
6. They will not show the new film. -
7. He won't see Sue. -
8. They will not ask him. -
9. Will the company employ a new worker? -
10. Will the plumber repair the shower? -