

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 bormed 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.

- ✓
..... *been*
- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)
- 7)
- 8)
- 9)
- 10)
- 11)
- 12)
- 13)
- 14)
- 15)

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