

THE PASSIVE VOICE

1. The Use of the Passive Voice

We generally use the passive voice

a. When it is not necessary to mention the doer of the action as it is obvious who is /was/will be

- The rubbish has not been collected.
- The streets are swept every day.
- Your hand will be x-rayed.

b. When we do not know, or do not know exactly, or have forgotten who did the action.

- The minister was murdered.
- You will be met at the station.
- My car has been moved..... I have been told that

c. When the subject of the active verb is People

- People suspect him of receiving stolen goods.
- He is suspected of receiving stolen goods. (preferable)
- People suppose that they are living in Paris.
- They are supposed to be living in Paris (preferable)

d. When the subject of the active verb would be the indefinite pronoun One.

- One sees this sort of advertisement everywhere.
- This sort of advertisement is seen everywhere. (preferable)

e. When we are more interested in the action than the person who does it.

- The house next door has been bought.

f. To avoid an awkward or ungrammatical sentence or change of subject in the middle of the sentence

- When he arrived home, a detective arrested him.

This sentence would be better expressed: When he arrived home, he was arrested.

- The Prime Minister arrived back in London last night and reporters immediately besieged him.

This sentence will be better expressed: The Prime Minister arrived back in London and was besieged by reporters.

g. In factual writing, particularly in describing procedures and processes, we often omit agents and use passives instead.

- Nuclear waste will be radioactive even after 20 centuries, so it must be disposed of very carefully.

h. When we wish to make a statement sound impersonal (perhaps out of modesty, or when we have some unpleasant statement to make). For instance, an employer may use it to disclaim responsibility for disagreeable announcement:

- Overtime rates are being reduced.

NOTE that the passive form is not an equivalent alternative to the active; while both forms of expressing an idea may be syntactically possible, our choice between passive and active will depend on what we consider the Focus of Interest in the sentence.

- The storm damaged the roof. (1)
- The roof was damaged by the storm. (2)

The sentence (1) is about the storm and says what it did, whereas the sentence (2) is about the roof and what happened to it.

i. In some cases, it is necessary to mention the agent because the meaning is incomplete without it or for emphasis.

- Shakespeare wrote Hamlet. → *Hamlet was written by Shakespeare.* (not *Hamlet was written.* - incomplete meaning)
- Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa. → *The Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo da Vinci.* (not *The Mona Lisa was painted.* - incomplete meaning)
- *Is the national anthem 'kassaman' written by Moufdi Zakaria or (by) Kateb Yassine?* (emphasis)

j. It is also necessary to mention the agent to give information about the causes.

- A goldfish stung the little boy. → *The little boy was stung by a goldfish.*
- The antibiotics can't cure this disease. → *This disease can't be cured by antibiotics.*

k. Because an agent is mentioned in such sentences the preposition 'by' is used, but if something inanimate is mentioned other prepositions may be used, namely, 'with' or 'in'

- Gas filled the cellar. → *The cellar was filled with gas.*
- The food contained arsenic. → *Arsenic was contained in the food.*

2. The Form

The passive voice is formed by using the auxiliary ‘to be’ and the past participle of the verb. It is formed from the active by placing the object of the active as the subject of the passive. The passive verb is formed by ‘to be’ having the same tense as that of the active verb and the past participle of the verb. All the tenses and the forms can be used in the passive with the exception of the present perfect continuous, the past perfect continuous or the future continuous for reasons of style. The following table illustrates.

Active voice	Passive voice
Present simple → Bank robbers generally wear stocking masks.	am / is / are + PP Stocking masks <i>are</i> generally worn.
Present continuous → The police are searching every car for smuggled drugs.	am / is / are being + Past Participle(PP) Every car <i>is being searched</i> for smuggled drugs.
Present perfect → The police have caught the escaped prisoner.	has / have been + PP The escaped prisoner <i>has been caught</i> .
Past simple → The thieves stole her diamond necklace.	was / were + PP Her diamond necklace <i>was stolen</i> .
Past continuous → The police were watching the house when the burglar escaped.	was / were being + PP The house <i>was being watched</i> when the burglar escaped.
Past perfect → The pickpocket had stolen the wallet.	had been + PP The wallet <i>had been stolen</i> .

3. Objects in Passives

Passives are formed from transitive verbs describing actions; indeed, intransitive verbs can't yield a passive form.

- The team wins the championship twice. → *The championship is won twice.* (Transitive verb)
- She has three daughters. → *Three daughters are had.* (Verb describing a state).
- They woke up late. → *They were woken up late.* (Intransitive verb)

If a sentence has both a direct and an indirect object, then it is possible to have two passive forms:

- Someone gave me a parking ticket at lunchtime. →
 - a. *I was given a parking ticket at lunchtime.* or
 - b. *A parking ticket was given to me at lunchtime.*

But, in fact, the first of these two forms is far more usual, where the indirect object *me* becomes the subject *I*.

Verbs that can't be followed by an indirect then direct object in the active, ie, they can be followed only by a direct object, preposition and indirect object (DO+prep+IO), have only one passive form.

- She explained the situation to us. → *The situation was explained to us.*
Not (She explained us the situation . → *We were explained the situation.*)

Such verbs are to do with reporting what was said or thought like: demonstrate, describe, announce, mention, present, report, suggest, proposed, introduce.

Complements in active sentences can't be the subjects of the passive.

- They elected Clinton president twice. → *Clinton was elected twice.* (Not President was elected Clinton twice.)

4. Phrasal Verbs and Passives

It is possible to form passives from transitive phrasal verbs, and the preposition/adverb is placed directly after the verb.

- The robbers broke into the house. → *The house was broken into.*
- They had thrown away the old newspapers. → *The old newspapers had been thrown away.*
- My friends went away. (not possible because it's an intransitive phrasal verb)

Even verbs followed by prepositions and objects (verb + preposition + object) can be put in the passive form.

- Meriem writes to him twice a month. → *He is written to twice a month.*
- You can play with these cubs safely. → *These cubs can be played with safely.*

5. Passive of verbs of command/request/invitation /advice ...

We can make the passive form of verbs of command/advice/invitation/request + Indirect object+ infinitive in two ways:

a. Using the passive form of the main verb:

He advised me to leave the group.

I wa advised to leave the group.

b. Using the same active verb with a that clause:

He urged the council to reduce the rates.

He urged that the rates should be reduced .

Note The verb 'have' cannot be used into the passive form and 'to be born' can only be used into the passive whereas the verb 'marry' is usually put into the passive.

- My grandfather has ten children. → *Ten children are had.* (incorrect use of the passive)
- My aunt's daughter was born in Malaysia. → *My aunt born her daughter in Malaysia.* (incorrect use of the active)
- My parents *were married* in 1970.