

Active voice vs Passive voice

In English grammar, verbs have five properties: **voice, mood, tense, person, and number**. In this lesson we are going to focus on its voice. In English, the two grammatical voices are **active** and **passive**. **Active** voice means that a sentence has a subject that acts upon its verb. **Passive voice** means that a subject is a recipient of the action of the verb.

Active voice: | That man **stole** my bike.

Active voice: | My bike **was stolen** by that man.

Active voice

When the subject of a sentence performs the action of the verb, we say that the sentence is in the **active voice**. Sentences in the active voice have a **strong, direct, and clear tone**.

Here are some short and straightforward examples of active voice:

Robbie ate three **hot dogs**.

Susan read that **romantic novel** in one day.

Charlie is cleaning **his room**.

All three sentences have a basic active voice construction: **subject, verb, and object**.

The subject **Robbie** performs the action described by **ate**. The subject **Susan** performs the action described by **read**. The subject **Charlie** performs the action described by **is cleaning**.

Passive voice

In the **passive voice**, the subject of a sentence is no longer the "**doer**" of the action, but the **recipient** of the action. Meanwhile, what was the subject of a sentence in the active voice (the "**doer**") becomes the "**agent**" in the equivalent passive voice sentence.

Active voice: The **dog** bit the **girl**.



Passive voice: The **girl** was bitten by the **dog**.

The passive voice is always constructed with a conjugated form of the verb "**to be**" plus the **past participle** of the **main verb**. For these examples of passive voice, we will transform the three active sentences above to illustrate the differences:

Robbie ate three **hot dogs**. -Three **hot dogs** were eaten by **Robbie**.

Susan read that **romantic novel** in one day. -That **romantic novel** was read in one day by **Susan**.

Charlie is cleaning **his room**. -**The room** is being cleaned by **Charlie**.



Let's take a closer look at the first pair of sentences:

"Robbie ate three hot dogs at dinner."

Three hot dogs were eaten at dinner by Robbie.

The active sentence consists of **Robbie** (subject) + **ate** (verb) + **three hot dogs** (object). The passive sentence consists of **Three hot dogs** (object) + **were eaten** (a form of to be plus the past participle eaten) + **by** (preposition) + **Robbie** (subject). Making the sentence passive flipped the structure so the preposition "**by**" is used to introduce the agent. In fact, all three of the transformed sentences above required the addition of **by**.

Uses

1_ When the agent is unknown. The speaker doesn't know who or what does/did something.

The car **was stolen**. (We don't know who stole it.)

5_ With impersonal statements to give an authoritative tone.

Visitors **are requested not to smoke** at the museum.

2_ When the agent is obvious. The speaker doesn't need to say who or what does/did something because it's obvious from the situation or context.

The thief **has been** arrested. (The police always arrest criminals.)

6_ To take away the focus of responsibility, to give an official tone.

It **is believed** that the electrical connection will be repaired in due course.

3_ To change or maintain the focus of interest.

James **was escorted** by the police. (We are interested in James, not the police.)

7_ To describe processes

First, coffee beans **are taken** from the trees, and then **dried** in the sun.

4_ When the action is more important than the agent. This is mostly in processes, instructions, events, reports, headlines, new items, and advertisements.

100 houses **were destroyed** in the earthquake.

8_ When writing in a formal style.

Your ticket **has been booked**.

Form

The **passive voice** is made with the different tenses of the **verb to be + past participle**. Most verbs with an object (transitive verbs) can be made passive; verbs with no object (intransitive) cannot be passive.

1_ The object of the active sentence becomes the **subject** of the passive sentence.

2_ We change the main verb of the active voice sentence into the passive voice.

It is formed by putting the **verb to be** into the same tense as the active verb and adding the past participle of the

active verb.



The **tense remains unchanged**. (be + past participle)

3_ The subject of the active voice sentence becomes **the agent** of the passive sentence. The agent is very often not mentioned. When it is mentioned it is preceded by **“by”** and placed at the end of the clause.

Active voice: The children saw a **horror movie**.

Passive voice: A **horror movie** was seen **by the children**.

Passive voice

Present tenses form

Tenses	Active voice	Passive voice
Present simple	Subject + verb They make cellphones in China.	Subject + am/is/are + past participle Cellphones are made in China.
Present continuous	Subject + am/is/are + verb -ing Sarah is baking a cake.	Subject + am/is/are + being + past participle A cake is being baked by Sarah.
Present perfect	Subject + have/has + past participle Sally has cleaned her bedroom.	Subject + have/has + been + past participle Her bedroom has been cleaned by Sarah.

Past tenses form

Tenses	Active voice	Passive voice
Past simple	Subject + verb William Shakespeare wrote Hamlet.	Subject + was/were + past participle Hamlet was written by Shakespeare.
Past continuous	Subject + was/were + verb -ing They were listening to music last night.	Subject + was/were + being + past participle Music was being listened to last night.

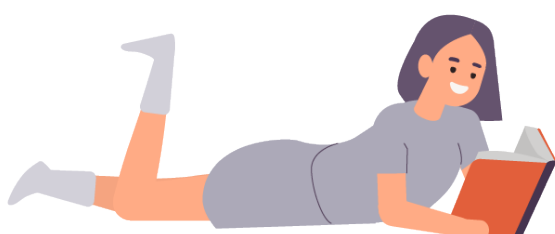
Past perfect	<p>Subject + had + past participle</p> <p>Thomas had read that book before.</p>	<p>Subject + had + past participle</p> <p>Thomas had read that book before.</p>
--------------	---	---

Future tenses form

Tenses	Active voice	Passive voice
Future simple	<p>Subject + will + infinitive verb</p> <p>They will do a test tomorrow.</p>	<p>Subject + will + be + past participle</p> <p>A test will be done by them tomorrow.</p>
Going to	<p>Subject + am/is/are + going to + infinitive verb</p> <p>Tom is going to give a speech next week.</p>	<p>Subject + am/is/are + going to + be + Past participle</p> <p>A speech is going to be given by Tom.</p>
Future perfect	<p>Subject + will + have + past participle</p> <p>They will have taken good photos.</p>	<p>Subject + will + have + been + past participle</p> <p>Good photos will have been taken by them.</p>

Other forms

Tenses	Active voice	Passive voice
To- infinitive	<p>Subject + have/has + to infinitive</p> <p>Mike has to deliver the letters.</p>	<p>Subject + have/has + to infinitive + Past participle</p> <p>The letters have to be delivered by Mike.</p>
Modals	<p>Subject + modal verb + infinitive verb</p> <p>I must do my homework.</p>	<p>Subject + modal verb + verb to be + infinitive verb</p> <p>My homework must be done.</p>





Be careful!

The tense of the passive sentence is shown in the verb **"be"** and it must be followed by a **past participle**.

Active voice: My parents **will buy** plane tickets.

Passive voice: Plane tickets **will be bought** by my parents.

If two verbs in the passive voice are connected with **"and"**, do not repeat **"be"**.

The Oscars **are televised** and **seen** by millions of people.

Let's practice!

1. Complete the sentences with the correct passive form of the verbs in brackets. Use the present simple.

- a) Spanish **(speak)** in many countries.
- b) The post **(deliver)** at about 7 o'clock every morning.
- c) **(the building/use)** anymore?
- d) How often **(the World Cup/hold)**?
- e) How **(your name/spell)**?
- f) My salary **(pay)** every month.
- g) These cars **(not make)** in Japan.

2. Complete the sentences with the correct passive form of the verbs in brackets. Use the past simple.

- a) My bike **(repair)** last week.
- b) That song **(not write)** by a famous singer.
- c) **(the phone/answer)** by a young boy?
- d) The film **(make)** twenty years ago.
- e) When **(tennis/invent)**?
- f) The car **(not damaged)** in the accident.

Passive voice form

Rules and examples

Let's consider some rules when using sentences in the passive form, to avoid making mistakes specially in the form.

Rules	Example
An adverb can be placed between the auxiliary verb and the main verb .	The results are never announced ahead of time.
The pronouns in an active sentence and a passive sentence usually change. After by , the object pronoun is used.	Active voice: She saw him. Passive voice: He was seen by her .
Affirmative, negative and interrogative statements never use auxiliary verbs (do, does, or did) with the passive voice.	<div>✓</div> The movie wasn't filmed in Hollywood. <div>✗</div> The movie didn't filmed in Hollywood.

**Be careful!**

When transforming a sentence from active to passive voice consider the **new subject** and change the verb to a form of **be + past participle** accordingly.

His friends **are reading** a new novel.



A new novel **is being read** by them.



A new novel **are being read** by his friends.

Agent

We usually **only** refer to **the agent** when it gives us **some important information** which otherwise would be missing from the sentence. It is placed **after the past participle** and it is **preceded by the preposition "by"**. To say **who** did the action that we are talking about, (agent), we use the preposition **by** and the **name** (by Sally), **noun** (by a famous designer) or **pronoun** (by him) at the end of the sentence.

For example:

The window is being cleaned **by Sally**.
Our house was designed **by a famous architect**.
The hamburgers will be done **by him**.

Without an agent

It is not necessary to include the agent in the passive sentences in the following situations:
When it is **not** important to **mention who performed the action**.

The invitations **have been sent out**.

When we **do not know the agent** or we prefer **not to mention** the agent.

My wallet **was stolen** last week.

When the **agent is obvious** and doesn't need to be mentioned.

Hackers **were caught** last night. (It is obvious, they were caught by the police.)

In conversation, with the impersonal subjects **people, you, we, or they**.

People **are asked not to smoke** in restaurants.

In more **formal speech and writing**, the passive is used **with no agent**.

Popcorn **is sold** in movie theaters.

With an agent

The agent in the passive voice sentence is included in the following cases:

When the agent is included, use **by + noun or object pronoun**.

The song was written **by Britney Spears**.

When the **agent made, discovered, invented, designed, built, wrote, painted, or composed something**.

The dress was designed **by Versace**.

To **continue with the same subject** of the preceding sentence.

Their **wedding** took place in 1990. **It was attended** by 300 people.

To **shift the emphasis to the object** of the preceding sentence.

Steven Spielberg directed Star Wars, didn't he? No, Star Wars was directed **by George Lucas**.



Tip

When the sentence has a **strong agent** (a specific person: Steven Spielberg, Ralph Lauren, William Shakespeare, etc.), we can use either the **active** or the **passive voice**. However, the active voice is more common than the passive voice, because it puts more emphasis on the person who performs the action.

Active voice: Fincher **has made** many movies.

Passive voice: Many movies **have been made** by Fincher.

By or with?

In the passive voice, we can use either **by** or **with** to introduce the agent:

By with the agent to refer to **by whom** the action is being done.

The door was opened **by Mr. Thompson**. (Mr Thompson = agent)

The lesson is being delivered **by Miss Williams**. (Miss Williams = agent)

With to refer to the **instrument**, **object** or **material** that was used for something to be done.

The door was opened **with a key**. (a **key** = the object that was used)

The cake was made **with butter, eggs and milk**. (**Butter, eggs and milk** = the materials that were used.)

Let's practice!

3. Rewrite these sentences in the passive voice.

a) Someone built this house 300 years ago.

.....

b) A thief stole my wallet.

.....

c) The police will arrest the burglars.

.....

d) They produce bikes in this factory.

.....

e) They serve breakfast at nine o'clock every day.

.....

f) People throw away plastic in the sea.

.....

g) They make coffee in Colombia.

.....

h) Someone stole Peter's bike last night.

.....

4. Rewrite these sentences in the passive voice.

a) They will build a new bridge next week.

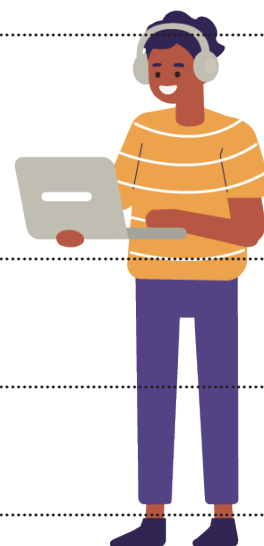
.....

b) Steven Spielberg directed Jurassic Park.

.....

c) Versace will design her costume.

.....



d) Someone found my watch.

.....

e) One of the students broke the blackboard.

.....

f) They will deliver my computer on Tuesday.

.....

g) Mary invited Paul to her wedding party.

.....

h) Russian astronomers discovered a new planet.

.....

Verbs with two objects

Some verbs have two objects: **a direct object and an indirect object**. When we have verbs that take two objects like, for example, give **somebody something**, we can convert the active sentence into a passive one in two ways:

A. By making the indirect (animate) object the subject of the passive voice sentence, which is also the way that we usually prefer.

Active voice: They gave **Spielberg** an award.

Passive voice: **Spielberg** was given an award.

B. By making the direct (inanimate) object the subject of the passive voice.

Active voice: Matt gave me **this gift**.

Passive voice: **This gift** was given to me by Matt.

Some of the verbs that take **two objects** are: **give, tell, send, show, bring, write, offer, pay**, etc. When the indirect object is alone after the verb in the passive voice sentence, it needs the preposition **"to"**.

If the **indirect object** of the active voice sentence is a **personal pronoun** it has to be changed into a **subject pronoun** to be the subject of the passive voice sentence.

Transitive and intransitive verbs

Transitive verbs are those verbs which are **followed by an object**. They can be used in the active and passive voice.

Subject+ verb + object

Active voice: Steve Jobs created **Apple**.

Passive voice: Apple **was created** by Steve Jobs.

Intransitive verbs are those verbs which do not have an object. In these cases, we **cannot use the passive voice** with these verbs.

Subject+ verb + -objeto

It **rained** heavily last night.
She **worked** with many artists.
They always **arrive** late to work.



Be careful!

The verb **"leave"** can be intransitive **or transitive**, depending on its meaning.

In sentence **(A)**, leave means **"go away from"**, and it is an intransitive verb. It has no passive form. In sentence **(B)**, leave means **"not taken"** and it is a **transitive** verb. It has a passive form.

A. Walter **left** Kansas City in 1928. | **B.** The DVD **was left** in the DVD player.

The verbs **"change"** and **"move"** can be intransitive or transitive. When a change happens through a **natural process** (A), it is intransitive. When someone specific causes the change (b), it is transitive.

A. Horror movies **have changed** a lot over the years.

B. The light bulb **was changed** by the janitor.

Passive voice with "Get"

The verb **"get"** is often used instead of **"be"** in the passive voice in informal spoken English, especially to refer to an action that happens by accident or unexpectedly:

Her car **got stolen** in front of her flat last night.
Williams **got fired** because he was always late for work.

We can also use **"get"** to express action and change and is only used with **action verbs, not state verbs**:



Tom **was fired** because he was always late for work.



Jerry **got fired** because he was always late for work. (**Fire** is an **action verb**)



Nothing **was known** about the murderer.



Nothing **got known** about the murderer. (**Know** is a **state verb**)

As **"get"** in the passive voice expresses **action**, it makes it possible to differentiate between an **action** and a state if it is not otherwise clear.

The kitchen window **was broken**. (**State or action**)
The kitchen window **got broken**. (**Action**)

The passive **with “be”** and the **agent mentioned** also makes the distinction clear:

The kitchen window was broken **by the children**. (Action)

A **reflexive pronoun** after get indicates that the recipient of the action is in some way involved in or responsible for what happened:

He **got injured** while playing football. (It was an accident)
She **got herself injured while** trying bike stunts. (It was partly his fault)

The **get passive** is also used in certain idiomatic expressions:

In conversation, we sometimes use **“get” instead of “be”** with the passive. We usually **omit** the agent **after get**.

get paid: be paid
get shot: be shot

He **was shot** by a cowboy. | He **got shot** three times.



Be careful!

When get is used with the passive voice, **questions** and **negatives** are formed with **do, does, did**, and **other auxiliaries**. **Be** is not used with **get**.



She **didn't get** paid last Friday.



She **wasn't get** paid last Friday.

Passive constructions with reporting verbs

Say and believe

You can use the following passive constructions with **verbs of speech or thought** to show that you are **not sure of the truth of the statement** or that you want to **distance** yourself from it. You use these constructions in a **formal style**.

Structure

You can use **it + passive + that clause**.

It is believed that the government will raise the taxes.

You can use **subject + passive + to -infinitive** when the belief or thought is **referring to an earlier action**.

The government is said to have reduced the taxes.

Other reporting verbs that can be used in the passive form are:

Consider-expect-know-report-say-understand-think-consider-allege-claim-acknowledge

It is considered that young children spend more than 10 hours in front of the computer.
It was reported that many teenagers were arrested last night.

Participles and adjectives with get

Some participles can be used as adjectives. Let's see which are the meanings that they convey in each case.

A. Be + past participle describes the **status of a noun** over a period of time.

B. Get + past participle means **become**. There is no reference to the continuation of this status.

A. Is Julia married? | **B. When did she get married?**

A. Be + adjective describes the status of a noun over a period of time.

B. Get + adjective means become.

A. Football players are rich. | **B. A lot of people would like to get rich quickly.**



Tip

Notice the difference between **to be married**, **to marry**, **to get married**.

Molly **is married**. She **has been married** to the same man for many years. (**Be married** describes one's status.)

She **married** Tom in 1981. (The verb **marry** is followed by **an object**.)

Molly and Tom **got married** in 1981. (**Get married** is **not followed by an object**.)

Causative have and get

We use a **causative verb** when we want to talk about **something that someone else did for us** or **for another person**.

Active voice: I cleaned my house. (**This means I cleaned it myself**).

Causative have: I had my house **cleaned**. (**Somebody else did it for me**).

Structures

We usually use **"have something done"** when we are talking about paying someone to do something for us. It's often

I had my car **washed**.

We can also use **"get something done"**. This has the same meaning as 'have', but it is less formal.

Subject + get + object + past participle

I'll get my hair **cut** next week.



We can also use the construction **“have someone do something”**. This structure is used to say **who did the thing**. We talk about the person who we asked to do the thing for us.

Subject + have + person + infinitive

I **had the electrician look** at my broken light.
The doctor **will have the secretary call** the patients.

We can also use the construction **“get someone to do something”**. This also means that you cause another person to do something maybe by **paying, asking** or **persuading** them to do it.

Subject + get + someone + to + infinitive

She **gets her son to do** his homework.
I **got the cleaner to clean** under the cupboards.

Review

5_ Change the following sentences into passive sentences using the words in brackets.

a) We sell tickets for all the museums at the tourist office. (Tickets for all the museums/sell/at the tourist office)

.....

b) Someone painted the bedroom last week. (The bedroom/paint/last week)

.....

c) Several people saw the car accident. (The car accident/see/by several people)

.....

d) Where do they make these pots? (Where/these pots/make?)

.....

e) Where do they make these video recorders? (Where/these video recorders/make)

.....

6_ Put into the correct active or passive form.

a) She promised him a new bag.

He

b) They will take the girl to hospital tomorrow.

The girl

c) You cannot expect young people to understand these problems.

Young people

d) No-one has climbed this hill before.

This hill

e) He disappeared from the face of the earth and no-one has seen him again.

He disappeared from the face of the earth and

7_ Put the following sentences into the passive with reporting verbs.

a) People claim The Starry Night is the world's most famous painting.

The Starry Night

b) Experts believe it was a portrait of a queen.

It is

c) They say her eyes hide a secret.

Her eyes

d) They say experts are studying ancient objects from a British castle.

Experts

e) People think the fire started at about 10 o'clock.

The fire



1. a) is spoken | b) is delivered | c) Is the building used | d) is the World Cup held | e) is your name spelled | f) is paid | g) are made
2. a) was repaired | b) wasn't written | c) was the phone answered | d) was made | e) was tennis invented | f) was not damaged
3. a) This house was built 300 years ago. | b) My watch was stolen by a thief. | c) The burglars will be arrested by the police. | d) Cars are produced in this factory. | e) Breakfast is served at nine o'clock every day. | f) Tones of rubbish are thrown away in the sea. | g) Coffee was made in Colombia. | h) Peter's bike was stolen last night.
4. a) A new bridge will be built next week. | b) Jurassic Park was directed by Steven Spielberg. | c) Her costume will be designed by Versace. | d) My watch was found by someone. | e) The blackboard was broken by one of the students. | f) My computer will be delivered on Tuesday. | g) Paul was invited by Mary to her wedding party. / Paul was invited to Mary's wedding party. | h) A new planet was discovered by Russian astronomers.
5. a) Tickets for all museums are sold at the tourist office. | b) The bedroom was painted last week. | c) The car accident was seen by several people. | d) Where were these pots made?
6. a) He was promised a new bag. | b) The girl will be taken to hospital tomorrow by them. | c) Young people cannot be expected to understand these problems. | d) This hill hasn't been climbed by anyone before. | e) He disappeared from the face of the earth and he hasn't been seen again.
7. a) is claimed to be the world's most famous painting. | b) believed it was a portrait of a queen. | c) are said to hide a secret. | d) are said to be studying objects from a British ship. | e) is thought to have started at about 10 o'clock.

Answer key