

English grammar: Passive voice

Form

Tense	Passive
Present simple	The car is repaired.
Present continuous	The car is being repaired.
Past simple	The car was repaired.
Past continuous	The car was being repaired.
Present perfect	The car has just been repaired.
Past perfect	The car had been repaired.
Future simple	The car will be repaired.
Present conditional	The car would be repaired.
Perfect conditional	The car would have been repaired.

The passive voice in English is formed with the verb to be and the past participle, which is different for regular verbs (translated, mended) and irregular verbs (taken, thrown).

Statement: The letter is written. This shop has been opened.

Question: Is the letter written? Has the shop been opened?

Negative: The letter is not written. The shop has not been opened.

The passive continuous forms of the present and past tense are as follows. (Other tenses are not normally used in the continuous.)

Present: A new house is being built in our street.

Past: A new house was being built in our street.

In all the examples above the agent is not mentioned and so we do not know it.

Similarly: Flowers were planted in the garden. (We do not know who did it).

If we want to say who planted the flowers we mention the agent at the end of the sentence and use the preposition by.

The flowers were planted by my mother.

But: The window was smashed with a stone. (The stone is not the agent. We do not know who smashed the window. We only know how he or she did it).

Passive voice with direct and indirect objects

If there are both the direct and indirect objects in the sentence, the indirect object becomes the subject.

Active: My friend sent me a letter.

Passive: I was sent a letter by my friend. (Not: A letter was sent to me by my friend. This sentence does not sound natural in English.)

Similarly: They offer Trevor a place. - Trevor is offered a place.

Passive with verbs followed by the infinitive without to

In the active some verbs are followed by the infinitive without to. In the passive we use most such verbs with the infinitive with to.

Active: We saw them come. She made him do it.

Passive: They were seen to come. He was made to do it.

But: They let us go. - We were let go.

Use

The passive voice is used:

1. If the action is more important than the agent.

A demonstration has been held. This theatre was built in 1868.

The important thing is what happened, not who did it.

2. If the agent is not known.

He was offered a job. (someone offered him the job)

They are supposed to be good students. (some teachers suppose that)

The difference in meaning between the passive of simple and continuous tenses.

A new house is built in our street. (The house is finished.)

A new house is being built in our street. (They are building it these days, it is not finished.)

I was being introduced to Mrs. Jones when her husband arrived. (Her husband arrived in the middle of the introduction.)

When her husband arrived I was introduced to Mrs. Jones. (Her husband arrived first and then she introduced me.)

Notes

The passive voice is typical of an impersonal and formal style, that is why you can often find it in public notices, announcements, instructions or scientific articles.

English is spoken in this shop. Visitors are not allowed to smoke. The seal must be removed.

In a less formal style the active is more usual.

English is spoken in this shop. - We speak English in this shop.

He was seen in Dover. - They saw him in Dover.

The seal must be removed. - You must remove the seal.

In the English language the passive is more frequent than in many other languages. Moreover, you can find some structures in English which are not possible in some languages.

I am told that you are going to have a baby. It is thought that the crises will end soon.