



The Passive

Overview

In the passive, **the object** of an active verb becomes **the subject** of the passive verb. In the 2 sentences below, **the boy** in **(a)** becomes the subject of the passive verb in **(b)**. Notice that the subject of an active verb follows **by** in a passive sentence. The noun that follows **by** is called the “agent.” In **(b)**: **Mary** is the agent. Sentences **(a)** and **(b)** have the same meaning, although the focus has shifted, i.e. from **Mary** to **the boy**.

	Subject	Verb	Object
a) Active:	Mary	helped	the boy
b) Passive:	The boy	was helped	by Mary

Only **transitive verbs** (verbs that can be followed by an object) are used in the passive. It is not possible to use intransitive verbs (e.g. happen, sleep, come, seem) in the passive because an object is needed.

- c) Active: An accident **happened**
- d) Passive: (no passive possible)

Forming the passive: **be + past participle**. Note that the verb **to be** indicates the verb tense being used: Sentences **(a)** and **(b)** above are in the past tense (be careful with irregular verbs).

Example: go → went → gone... gone = past participle).

Verb Tense	Active	Passive
Simple Present	Mary helps the boy	The boy is helped by Mary
Present Progressive	Mary is helping the boy	The boy is being helped by Mary
Simple Past	Mary helped the boy	The boy was helped by Mary
Past Progressive	Mary was helping the boy	The boy was being helped by Mary
Future	Mary will help the boy	The boy will be helped by Mary

In the question form of passive verbs, an auxiliary verb (helping verb) precedes the subject.

- e) Was the boy helped by Mary?
- f) Is the boy being helped by Mary?

Using the Passive

The passive is often used without the **by-phrase**. The passive is most frequently used when it is not known or it is not important to know exactly who performs an action.

In **(g)**: Rice is grown in India by people, by farmers, by someone. It is not known, or important to know exactly who grows rice in India. In **(j)**, police usually arrest people, and so this is unnecessary to include in the headline.

(g), **(h)**, and **(i)** are examples of the passive being used without the by-phrase.

- g) Rice **is grown** in India.
- h) Our house **was built** in 1980.
- i) This olive oil **was imported** from Crete.
- j) Three Men Arrested (newspaper headline) i.e. 3 men (were) arrested

The by-phrase is included only if it is important to know who performs an action, as in **(k)**, where **by Dr. Saunders** is important information, but using the passive shifts the emphasis to the report and **away from Dr. Saunders**:

- k) This report **was written** by Dr. Saunders.

If the speaker knows who performs an action, usually the active is used, as in **(l)**:

- l) My aunt **made** this rug. (active).

Sometimes, even when the speaker knows who performs an action, s/he chooses to use the passive with the **by-phrase** because s/he wants to focus attention on the subject of a sentence.

- m) This rug **was made** by my aunt; that rug **was made** by my mother.

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1

Rewrite the following active sentences using the passive:

- a) The boss **gave** him a job promotion
- b) Margaret Atwood **is writing** a new novel.
- c) Bill **will complete** the project by Friday
- d) Her mother **has invented** many things.

Exercise 2

Rewrite the following passive sentences using the active:

- a) This table was **made** by my friend James.
- b) This art show **was paid for** and **organized** by the government.