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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb Tense</th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple Present</td>
<td>Mary helps the boy</td>
<td>The boy is helped by Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Progressive</td>
<td>Mary is helping the boy</td>
<td>The boy is being helped by Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Past</td>
<td>Mary helped the boy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past Progressive</td>
<td>Mary was helping the boy</td>
<td>The boy was being helped by Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Mary will help the boy</td>
<td>The boy will be helped by Mary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.