# Passive Voice

In previous weeks, we discussed the main three aspects of past and present tense. In addition to these verb forms, we have active and passive forms of the verbs. Active verbs are the forms we have discussed so far.

### Objectives

1. Recognize the use of passive voice
2. Change active to passive voice in controlled contexts
3. Use passive voice to add formality

## What is Passive Voice?

A verb is a word that expresses an action, state, or occurrence. Often when we use a verb, we are expressing the action connected to the subject. The subject is the noun that is the doer of the verb. This is what we call active voice.

We are going to use two new vocabulary words to make our discussion of passive voice less confusing: **agent** and **receiver.** The **agent** is the doer of the action; in an active sentence, this is the subject. The **receiver**is the receiver of the action; in an active sentence, this is the object.

**Active Voice**

The agent

acts

upon the verb. The verb is done by the agent.

Example: Alice

**sings**

the song. (Alice is performing this action. Alice is the

**agent.**

)

 However, in more formal speaking, we often use the passive voice. The passive expresses the action connected to the receiver. The receiver moves before the verb, and the verb structure changes. This changes the focus from who did the verb to the receiver that was acted upon.

**Passive Voice**

The receiver

receives

the verb. The focus is on the receiver

which

is acted upon.

Example: The song

**was sung**

by Alice. (Alice is still performing the action, but our focus has shifted to the

**receiver--the song.**

)

 Think of this change of voice like moving the camera from the agent to the receiver of the verb.

Example:

We **built** a snowman.

The snowman **was built** by us.

The sun **melted** the snowman.

The snowman **was melted** by the sun.

## The Structure

To change a verb from active to passive, you need to be sure that the verb has a receiver (transitive verbs). If there is only an agent with no receiver of the verb (intransitive verbs), it cannot become a passive sentence.

An accident **happened** last weekend. (**Happen** does not have a receiver. It cannot be passive.)

He **caused** an accident last weekend. (**Caused** has a receiver. This can be passive.)

If there is a receiver for the verb, you can change the focus from the agent to the receiver.

An accident **was caused** by him last weekend.

This is how you make a passive sentence:

AGENT + VERB + RECEIVER

changes to

RECEIVER + BE + PAST PARTICIPLE (+ BY AGENT)

Look at the table to see more examples of passive voice.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Present Tense Verbs |  |
| The bird | eats | the seeds. |
| The seeds | are eaten | by the bird. |
| The man | is walking | the dog. |
| The dog | is being walked | by the man. |
| The coworkers | have signed | the card. |
| The card | has been signed | by the coworkers |
|  | Past Tense Verbs |  |
| The bird | ate | the seeds. |
| The seeds | were eaten | by the bird. |
| The man | was walking | the dog. |
| The dog | was being walked | by the man. |
| The coworkers | had signed | the card. |
| The card | had been signed | by the coworkers |

 Notice that the tense and aspect stays the same when the verb changes from active to passive, but the verb be shows the aspect. The main verb is always in the past participle. The agent and receiver switch places.

One more note on the structure: Passive voice does not always include the by + subject phrase. If it is not relevant to what the speaker is saying or is obvious, they may not include it.

The house was built (by a builder) last year.

This is obvious and is unlikely to be included.

## Why Use Passive Voice?

There are a few reasons why we use the passive voice in our speaking.

1. When we don't know the agent or don't want to point fingers
   * My bike **wasstolen** this morning.
   * The dishes **weren't washed** last night.
2. When the action and the receiver are important and the agent is distracting or unimportant
   * My book **will be published** soon.
   * The Internet **was started** not too long ago.
3. In science or teamwork when the result should be the focus
   * Five planets **have been known** since ancient times.
   * The product **was created** to help people.

Changing the focus by using either active or passive voice shows control over the language. This grammar form allows you to focus on what you think is most important.

As we have mentioned many times, it would be very unusual to speak only in the passive voice. You will see it mixed in with other forms of verbs.

### Exercise 1: Listen

Here is some practice to help you recognize and use the passive voice.

Utah Monolith Video

Watch this video and listen for examples of passive voice. This is also a great example of how different tenses and aspects are used together to create an interesting narrative.

Answer Key

1. It wasa three-sided, ten-foot-high sculpture **installed** in the middle of the desert...
2. I mean, scientists are literally counting sheep, the cliché of how to fall asleep, when they **are roused** into a new and dramatic sort of consciousness **by an otherworldly artwork**.
3. "The metal structure **has been removed**" Utah official said on Saturday.
4. And outside of Wendover, Utah, you can find Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, which, like a lot of my favorite art, **cannot** really **be described** or photographed effectively.
5. ... satellite photographs tell us that the obelisk **was installed** sometime in 2016, and McCracken died in 2011.

Artwork Video

Watch this video and listen for examples of passive voice. There is not a transcript for this video and she speaks quickly. You may need to listen to it more than once.

Answer Key

### Exercise 2: Active or Passive?

1. Write 5 sentences that can be made passive (transitive verbs like tell = can have an object).
   * Ex. The professor tells stories to explain the main idea.
2. Write 5 sentences that cannot be made passive (intransitive verbs like laugh = cannot have an object).
   * Ex. The class laughed when I made a joke.
3. Mix the sentences in a random order.
4. Your teacher will put you in a breakout room with a partner. Read your sentences to a partner.
5. Your partner will say active for sentences that can only be in active voice or passive for sentences that can be in passive voice.
6. You and your partner will change the sentences into passive voice.
   * Ex. The stories are told (by the professor) to explain the main idea.
7. Repeat the activity with your partner's list of sentences.
8. Be prepared to share your passive sentences with the class.

### Exercise 3: Great Inventions & Discoveries

1. Your teacher will assign you to a group to work with and tell you how much time you have for this activity.
2. As a group, choose a famous invention or discovery.
3. Prepare a short explanation of your choice using a combination of active and passive voice and different aspects of the past. Include some present sentences to explain the impact of that invention/discovery on the world now.
4. Make sure everyone in the group has the prepared explanation.
5. Your teacher will then put one person from each group into a new group.
6. Share the explanation your first group prepared with the new group.

### Exercise 4: Kahoot!

1. Go to <https://kahoot.it> and type the Game PIN your teacher gives you.
2. Your teacher will explain how to play the game. There will be a variety of question types:
   * Identify if a sentence is active or passive.
   * Identify if a verb can have an object.
   * Put the words in order to make a passive sentence.

## Review

Using active and passive voice to intentionally shift the focus of the sentence is a useful grammar skill.

Here are some important reminders:

* Remember that the active and passive forms will both be in the same tense and aspect.
* Only transitive verbs (that can have objects) can be used in passive voice.
* Passive voice should not be used consistently. It is only used to change the focus.

Read this online at <https://edtechbooks.org/advanced_mid_listening__speaking/passive_voice>