

# THE PASSIVE VOICE

## INTRODUCTION

The passive of an active tense 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 subject of the active verb becomes the ‘agent’ of the passive verb. 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: My grandfather planted this tree.*

*Passive: This tree was planted by my grandfather.*

## PASSIVE VERB TENSES

	ACTIVE VOICE	PASSIVE VOICE
Present Simple	<i>He <b>delivers</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>are delivered</b>.</i>
Past Simple	<i>He <b>delivered</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>were delivered</b>.</i>
Future Simple	<i>He <b>will deliver</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>will be delivered</b>.</i>
Present Continuous	<i>He <b>is delivering</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>are being delivered</b>.</i>
Past Continuous	<i>He <b>was delivering</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>were being delivered</b>.</i>
Going to	<i>He <b>is going to deliver</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>are going to be delivered</b>.</i>
Present Perfect	<i>He <b>has delivered</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>have been delivered</b>.</i>
Past Perfect	<i>He <b>had delivered</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>had been delivered</b>.</i>
Infinitive	<i>He <b>has to deliver</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>have to be delivered</b>.</i>
Modals	<i>He <b>must deliver</b> the letters.</i>	<i>The letters <b>must be delivered</b>.</i>

1

		SIMPLE	CONTINUOUS	PERFECT
PRESENT	+	S + am/is/are + Ptp	S + am/is/are + being + Ptp	S + have/has + been + Ptp
	-	S + am/is/are + not + Ptp	S + am/is/are + not + being + Ptp	S + have/has + not + been + Ptp
	?	Am/Is/Are + S + Ptp ?	Am/Is/Are) + S + being + Ptp ?	Have/Has) + S + been + Ptp ?
PAST	+	S + was/were + Ptp	S + was/were + being + Ptp	S + had + been + Ptp
	-	S + was/were + not + Ptp	S + was/were + not + being + Ptp	S + had + not + been + Ptp
	?	Was/Were + S + PtpV ?	Was/Were + S + being + Ptp?	Had + S + been + Ptp
FUTURE	+	S + will + be + Ptp		
	-	S + will + not + be + Ptp		
	?	Will + S + be + Ptp ?		
GOING TO	+	S + V to be (am/is/are) + going to + be + Ptp		
	-	S + V to be (am/is/are) + not + going to + be + Ptp		
	?	V to be (am/is/are) + S + going to + be + Ptp ?		

## Short answers

To make short answers:

- we use the verb **to be** (am/is/are/was/were) for *Present Simple*, *Past Simple*, *Present Continuous*, *Past Continuous* and *Going To* questions.
- we use the verb **have** (have/has/had) for *Present Perfect* and *Past Perfect* questions.
- we use **will** for *Future Simple* questions.

## USE

The Passive is used:

1. when the **agent** (=the person who does the action) is **unknown**, **unimportant** or **obvious** from the context.

*Jane **was shot**.* (We don't know who shot her.)

*This church **was built** in 1815.* (Unimportant agent)

*He **has been arrested**.* (Obviously by the police)

2. to make more **polite** or **formal** statements.

*The car **hasn't been cleaned**.* (more polite)

*(You haven't cleaned the car. – less polite)*

3. when the **action is more important** than the agent, as in processes, instructions, events, reports, headlines, new items, and advertisements.

*30 people **were killed** in the earthquake.*

4. to put **emphasis on the agent**.

*The new library **will be opened by the Queen**.*

## AGENT

To say who did the action that we are talking about, ie. to refer to the **agent**, we use the preposition **by** and the name (*by Peter*), noun (*by the teacher*) or pronoun (*by him*) at the end of the sentence.

We usually only refer to the agent when it gives us some important information which otherwise would be missing from the sentence.

*Our house **was designed by a famous architect**.*

We don't mention the agent:

1. if we don't know who has done what we are talking about.

*Our car **was stolen last night**.* (We don't know who stole it)

2. if we are not interested in who has done what we are talking about or it is not important to mention it.

*He **has been taken to hospital**.* (What we are interested in is the fact that he has been taken to hospital and not who has taken him.)

3. if it is easy to understand who did something without it being mentioned.

*The murderer **was arrested last night**.* (It is not necessary to mention that he has been arrested by the police because it is self-evident.)

4. if the subject of the active voice sentence is something like **somebody, people, they, you, etc.**

***Someone** broke the window. → The window was broken.*

## ACTIVE TO PASSIVE

To change a sentence from the active voice to the passive voice:

- the **object** of the active voice sentence becomes the **subject** of the passive voice sentence.

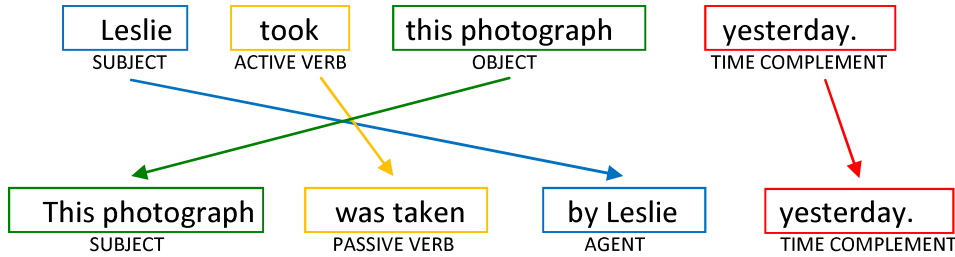
*Agatha Christie wrote **this book**.*

***This book** was written by Agatha Christie.*

- we change the main verb of the active voice sentence into the passive voice. The tense remains unchanged.

- the **subject** of the active voice sentence becomes the **agent** of the passive sentence. It is placed after the past participle and it is preceded by the preposition **by**.

*Agatha Christie wrote this book.*  
*This book was written **by Agatha Christie.***



**BY OR WITH?**

In the passive voice, we use:

- **by** with the **agent** to refer to by whom the action is being done.  
*The door was opened **by Mr Black.** (Mr Black = 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 omelette was made **with eggs, cheese and peppers.** (eggs, cheese and peppers = the material that was used)*

**DOUBLE OBJECT VERBS**

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:

- by making the **indirect** (animate) **object** the subject of the passive voice sentence, which is also the way that we usually prefer.  
*Rick gave me (indirect object) this book (direct object).*  
*I was given this book by Rick.*  
*This book was given to me by Rick.*

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.

SUBJECT		OBJECT
I	↔	me
You	↔	you
He	↔	him
She	↔	her
It	↔	it

SUBJECT		OBJECT
We	↔	us
You	↔	you
They	↔	them

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- A. J. Thomson and A.V. Martinet, A Practical English Grammar, Oxford University Press, 1986
- V. Evans, Round-Up (English Grammar Practice), Longman, 1995
- M. Carling and S. Jervis, Grammar Time 4, Longman, 2003
- S. Jervis, Grammar Time 5, Longman, 2003
- M. Carling, Grammar Time 6, Longman, 2003