

## The passive voice

### The difference between active and passive

When we use an **active verb**, we say **what the subject does**:

- The rottweiler attacked Archie-Lee.
- Someone has cleaned the windows.
- It's a big company. It employs two hundred people.

When we use a **passive verb**, we say **what happens to the subject**:

- Archie-Lee *was killed* by a rottweiler.
- The windows have been cleaned.
- Two hundred people are employed by the company.

### Forming the passive voice

The passive voice in English is composed of two elements:  
the **appropriate form** of the verb 'to be' + past participle

= take the same tense!

The object of an active verb corresponds to the subject of a passive verb.

Active: They completed the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937.

Passive: The Golden Gate Bridge was completed in 1937.



Active: You must obey traffic rules.

Passive: Traffic rules must be obeyed.



ACTIVE	PASSIVE
Simple present	The paper is written.
I write the paper.	
Simple present continuous	
I am writing the paper.	
Simple past	
I wrote the paper.	
Simple past continuous	
I was writing the paper.	
Simple future	
I will write the paper.	
Present perfect	
I have written the paper.	
Past perfect	
I had written the paper.	
Future perfect	
I will have written the paper.	



### Tips

- Never change the tense from the active sentence.
- Never delete the modal verb from the active sentence.
- Check the list of irregular verbs for irregular past participles.
- Passive sentence = always exactly 1 verb form more than the active sentence.

## Use

We use the passive...

... if the **agent** (= person or thing which causes an action) is **not known**.

- She was murdered. (We don't know who did it.)

... if the **agent** is **obvious** from the context or from general knowledge

- She has been sacked. (Obviously by her employer.)

... if the agent is not important or relevant

- Wars have been fought throughout history. (Who fought them is not important here.)

... in **formal English**: to describe **rules** and **procedures**

- Answers must be written in ink.

... in **academic and scientific English**: to focus on **issues** rather than on the people involved or to focus on industrial or scientific processes

- \*In order to decide which suited this project best I assessed the OCR tools.
- In order to decide which suited this project best the OCR tools were assessed.

... for **strategic purposes**, e.g. in letters of complaint to make the message less personal

- \*You made a mistake in calculating discount.
- A mistake was made in calculating discount. / There was an error in calculating the discount.

## Exercises

### Exercise 1

Rewrite these sentences using passive forms.

0. Someone might have stolen it.

*It might have been stolen.*

1. We will provide refreshments during the interval.

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2. You should complete the form in black ink.

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3. We have not tested this product on animals.

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4. We supply this appliance with a plug.

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5. Someone has fitted this car with an alarm.

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6. We arrange our displays in chronological sequence.

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7. You must wear hard hats while we are carrying out construction work. (two passives)

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8. We will prosecute all shoplifters.

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9. Closed circuit cameras are monitoring this area.

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10. You may find toilet facilities at the rear of block B.

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## Exercise 2

Rewrite these sentences using passive forms.

1. We will take care of all formalities.

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2. The customs officer made me open my suitcases.

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3. A lot of people say the government is out of touch with public opinion.

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4. The judge ought to have sent him to prison for life.

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5. The check-in clerk gave Stephen an upgrade to first class.

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6. A farmer let us park the caravan in his field overnight.

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7. They saw him enter the building carrying a shotgun.

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8. Some people think the proposed legislation is unworkable.

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9. Someone broke a pane of glass while the boys were playing in the street.

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10. Their parents have given the twins a puppy for their birthday.

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