

Active vs Passive Voice

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Note: This page focuses on the distinction between the Active and Passive Voice. For a detailed explanation of the Passive, please refer to the [main Passive page](#).

Review: Verb Tenses; Indicative vs Subjunctive Mood

Verbs can be in multiple tenses: In the Indicative Mood, verbs can be in the **Present** (er **sagt** alles; sie **geht** schnell), **Narrative Past** (one-word past tense, typically more formal: er **sagte** alles; sie **ging** schnell), **Conversational Past** (two-word past tense, typically more informal: er **hat** alles **gesagt**; sie **ist** schnell **gegangen**), **Future** (er **wird** alles **sagen**; sie **wird** schnell **gehen**), **Past Perfect** (emphasizing that an action HAD happened before another past action: er **hatte** alles **gesagt**, bevor sie ging; sie **war** **gegangen**, bevor er etwas sagen konnte), etc. The verb tenses [are summarized here](#).

Verbs can also be in two main moods, **indicative** (factual: what you do, what you did, what you will do etc.) and **subjunctive** (counterfactual: what you *would* do, *could* do, *would have* done, *should have* done etc.), each existing in various tenses. This is summarized on the page on [verb moods](#).

- In the first three semesters of German at the University of Michigan, we cover only Subjunctive II, the version of the subjunctive used to state what you *would* do, *could* do, *would have* done, *should have* done etc.). There is actually another important form of the Subjunctive mood, **Subjunctive I**, used for reporting speech. [Click here for more information on Subjunctive I](#), which is quite easy to learn, and good to be aware of especially in the context of news reporting.
- There is also a third mood: the **imperative**, used for giving commands (“**Iss** den SPAM!”; “**Stehen Sie auf!**”; “**Gehen wir** ins Museum!” etc.).

We will now see that there are also two possible “voices,” active and passive. In principle, the passive voice exists in all of the above tenses and moods. Even an imperative form of the passive is thinkable: Werde geliebt! – Be loved!

Two Voices

1. **Active Voice**: this is the “normal” voice, in which the subject of the verb (i.e. what the verb “agrees” with) is really the person or thing carrying it out:

- **Wir** essen den SPAM (subject: wir. **We** are doing the eating)
- **Das Kind** streichelt [=pets] den Hund (subject: das Kind. **The child** is doing the petting)
- **Ich** vergesse die Katze in der Waschmaschine (subject: I. **I** forget the cat in the washing machine: **I’m** doing the forgetting)
- **Es** regnet (subject: es. This example is more abstract. We don’t know what “it” is, but “**it**” is doing the raining)

Most active sentences include a **direct object in the accusative**:

- Wir essen **den SPAM** (The SPAM is the direct object: we are eating it)
- Das Kind streichelt [=pets] **den Hund** (The dog is the direct object: the child is petting it)
- Ich vergesse **die Katze** in der Waschmaschine (The cat is the direct object: I am forgetting it)
- **BUT**: Es regnet ("It rains": here, there is no direct object. All we know is that it's raining.)

2. **Passive Voice**: The passive voice turns the above state of affairs on its head. The direct object of the action becomes the subject (Nominative) of the passive sentence. Notice that the passive sentence may or may not mention the person or thing actually performing the action. The first three examples from the preceding section could be expressed as follows in the Passive voice:

- **Der SPAM wird gegessen** (**not** stating who is doing the eating: "the SPAM is being eaten") OR Der SPAM wird **von uns** gegessen (specifying that the eating is being done by us: "the SPAM is being eaten **by us**")
- **Der Hund wird gestreichelt** (**not** stating who is doing the petting: "the dog is being petted") OR Der Hund wird **von dem Kind** gestreichelt (specifying that the petting is being done by the child: "the dog is being petted **by the child**")
- Die Katze **wird** in der Waschmaschine **vergessen** (**not** stating who is doing the forgetting: "the cat is being forgotten in the washing machine") OR Die Katze wird **von mir** in der Waschmaschine vergessen (specifying that the forgetting is being done by me: "the cat is being forgotten in the washing machine **by me**")

Note that *****not all active sentences have a passive counterpart*****. In particular, the fourth example above, "Es regnet," cannot be rendered in the Passive. "~~Es wird geregnet~~" would mean something like "~~It is being rained~~," which makes no sense. Similarly, an attempt to render a sentence like "Ich schlafe" in the Passive would produce something like "~~Ich werde geschlafen~~," "~~I am being slept~~," which makes no sense. In general, it is better to think in terms of actively (haha) constructing passive sentences than to think of converting active sentences to passive ones. Although overuse of the Passive voice (in this sentence, for example 😊) is not disparaged quite as much in German as it is in English, **the Passive should only be used for a good reason**, e.g.:

- **the subject performing the action is unknown** (for example, when a crime is committed)
- **the speaker wants to de-emphasize the subject who performed the action** (e.g. politicians might prefer to say "Die Steuern wurden erhöht" ("Taxes were raised") to "Wir haben die Steuern erhöht" ("We raised taxes"))
- The Passive can also be used **to emphasize (or create an illusion of) objectivity**, e.g. in scientific writing.

Both voices exist in all tenses and moods. In the first three semesters of German at the University of Michigan, you will only be expected to know how to form the five main indicative passive tenses listed below (and how to use the Passive with modal verbs). Forming the passive subjunctive is quite easy, however: it works entirely analogously to the passive indicative.

German vs. English

German uses the verb “werden” to form the passive; English uses the verb “to be.” So where English says “The dog **i** spetted,” German **literally** says “The dog **becomes** petted.” This extends to all the tenses. Here is a dog being petted (streicheln = to pet) in the 5 main tenses of the passive voice, and also in the Present and Narrative Past tense with a modal verb:

Present	Der Hund wird <i>gestreichelt</i>	The dog is <i>petted</i>
Narrative Past (Präteritum)	Der Hund wurde <i>gestreichelt</i>	The dog was <i>petted</i>
Perfect (Conversational Past)	Der Hund ist <i>gestreichelt</i> worden	The dog was <i>petted</i>
Past Perfect	Der Hund war <i>gestreichelt</i> worden	The dog had been <i>petted</i>
Future	Der Hund wird <i>gestreichelt</i> werden	The dog will be <i>petted</i>
Modal–Present tense	Der Hund muss <i>gestreichelt</i> werden	The dog must be <i>petted</i>
Modal–Narrative Past tense	Der Hund musste <i>gestreichelt</i> werden	The dog had to be <i>petted</i>

Note how both German and English always insert the past participle of the main verb (here: *petted/gestreichelt*) in all passive tenses. In English, the various tenses are indicated by the various tenses of the verb “to be”; in German, by the various tenses of “werden.”

Note: The use of “werden” to form the Passive actually allows German to make a distinction between the “true” passive and the “**statal passive**.” The “true” passive describes an action that is (or was, or will be etc.) being performed. The statal passive is used to describe the state that something is in (hence the name “statal”), as opposed to the action that is being performed on it. Here are two examples:

Die Tür wird geöffnet. [true passive]	The door is (being) opened . When you read this, you picture the door in motion: a closed door is being opened.
Die Tür ist geöffnet. [statal passive]	The door is open . When you read this, you picture a door that is in the “state” of being open.
Der Computer wird repariert. [true passive]	The computer is (being) repaired . When you read this, you picture the computer in the shop, being worked on in order to make it work again. The owner is nervous and hoping for the best.
Der Computer ist repariert. [statal passive]	The computer has been repaired/is fixed . This sentence tells you that the computer is now fixed and works again. The owner is relieved, though the bill may be high.

English explanations of the German “statal passive” tend not to emphasize this form – and here, too, it is relegated to a note. The reason is that, for an English speaker, the “statal passive” comes naturally: it is formed using the verb “sein,” analogous to its English counterpart: The door **is** open – Die Tür **ist** geöffnet; The computer **is** fixed – Der Computer **ist** repariert. On the other hand, when forming sentences in the “true” passive, the challenge for English speakers is to remember to use a form of the verb “werden” to form the German passive, instead of a form of the verb “sein,” which would be analogous to English: Die Tür **wird** geöffnet – The door **is being** opened (at the moment); Der Computer **wird** repariert – The computer **is being** repaired. However, once an English speaker has begun to master the Passive, s/he may occasionally be tempted to use the verb “werden” in cases where the statal passive with “sein” would be appropriate. When this happens, it becomes important to understand and remember the distinction between the “true” and the “statal” passive.

“Converting” Active to Passive

As emphasized above, *****not all active sentences have a passive counterpart*****. As also mentioned above, it is best to construct Passive sentences directly (as described on the [main Passive page](#)), rather than trying to convert active voice sentences into sentences in the passive voice. Nevertheless, the question of how to “convert” active to passive sometimes arises, and attempting to do so can be instructive, so it is discussed here.

1a. **The direct (Accusative) object of the active sentence becomes the subject (Nominative) of the passive sentence (with which the verb werden agrees).** The **subject** of the active sentence can be omitted in the passive version (often, that’s the point of using the passive voice), but if you want, you can state it by inserting “von + ____ [in the Dative]” (equivalent to English “by ____”). All other nouns and pronouns remain unchanged; in particular, *dative objects remain dative* (see 1b below).

Er isst das Ei ==> Das Ei wird (von ihm) gegessen.	He eats the egg ==> The egg is eaten (by him).
Er isst die Eier ==> Die Eier werden (von ihm) gegessen.	He eats the eggs ==> The eggs are eaten (by him).
Sie gibt <i>uns</i> das Buch ==> Das Buch wird uns (von ihr) gegeben. [Note that we could start this sentence with <i>Uns</i> , but the subject would still be “das Buch” and so the verb would remain singular: Uns wird das Buch gegeben.]	She gives <i>us</i> the book ==> The book is given <i>to us</i> (by her). [Note that in English, the conversion from active to passive changes “us” to “to us.” No such change happens in German.]
Sie gibt <i>uns</i> die Bücher ==> Die Bücher werden uns (von ihr) gegeben. [Hier, “werden” is plural because “die Bücher” are plural. The fact that “uns” is plural is irrelevant: it is in the Dative, so it is not the subject of the verb, i.e. the verb does not agree with it.]	She gives <i>us</i> the books ==> The books are given <i>to us</i> (by her). [Note that in English, the conversion from active to passive changes “us” to “to us.” No such change happens in German.]

1b. In general, an active sentence needs to include a direct object so that it can be “converted” into a passive “equivalent”:

- Ich schlafe (I sleep): There is no direct (Accusative) object in the active sentence, and so there is no Passive equivalent. “~~Ich werde geschlafen~~” would mean something like “~~I am being slept~~,” which makes no sense.
- Es regnet (it rains): Again, there is no direct (Accusative) object in the active sentence, and so there is no Passive equivalent. As discussed above, “~~Es wird geregnet~~” would mean something like “~~It is being rained~~,” which makes no sense.

BUT: It is usually possible to “convert” active sentences with Dative (indirect) objects (and no Accusative objects) into logical Passive “equivalents.” The resulting sentences are technically examples of the **impersonal passive**, a form of the Passive without a “proper” subject. The standard examples of the impersonal passive are simple sentences like “Es wird getanzt” (“People are dancing,” “There is dancing going on”) or “Es wird gelacht” (“People are laughing”) (see the [main Passive page](#)), but impersonal passive statements can also include Dative objects, and in these cases it is important to remember that the Dative object is NOT the subject of the verb, i.e. the verb “werden” in the Passive sentence will not agree with it. **The subject of an impersonal passive sentence is always “es” (i.e. 3rd person singular)**, even in cases where the word “es” does not appear in the sentence (e.g. “Heute wird getanzt”: “There is (will be) dancing today”). Again, see the [main Passive page](#) for more details. Here are some examples in the current context of converting active statements with Dative objects (and no Accusative objects) into Passive “equivalents.” Note the contrast to English, where the verb changes depending on whether the German Dative object is singular or plural:

Du antwortest mir ==> Mir wird (von dir) geantwortet.	You answer me ==> I am answered (by you).
Du antwortest uns ==> Uns wird (von dir) geantwortet.	You answer us ==> We are answered (by you).
Sie dankt ihrem Vater ==> Ihrem Vater wird (von ihr) gedankt.	She thanks her father ==> Her father is thanked (by her).
Sie dankt ihren Eltern ==> Ihren Eltern wird (von ihr) gedankt.	She thanks her parents ==> Her parents are thanked (by her).

The singular verb “wird” in the right-hand column feels quite unintuitive to English speakers, but is a consequence of the fact that these sentences are all impersonal Passive sentences, with no noun or pronoun in the Nominative for the verb to agree with. As a result, the 3rd person singular is chosen as a default. Note also that whereas in English, word order may determine what the verb agrees with, in German, the only determinant is whether there is an Accusative object, and what that object is:

I am given the book.	Mir wird das Buch gegeben.
I am given the books.	Mir werden die Bücher gegeben.
The book is given to me.	Das Buch wird mir gegeben.
The books are given to me.	Die Bücher werden mir gegeben.
We are given the book.	Uns wird das Buch gegeben.
We are given the books.	Uns werden die Bücher gegeben.
The book is given to us.	Das Buch wird uns gegeben.

The books <i>are</i> given to us.	Die Bücher <i>werden</i> uns gegeben
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In all of the above examples, there IS a direct (Accusative) object in the corresponding active sentences: Someone gives me/us **das Buch/die Bücher**. So, **das Buch/die Bücher** become(s) the subject (Nominative) of the corresponding German passive sentences and the verb “werden” in these German passive sentences invariably agrees with **das Buch/die Bücher**, whereas the verb “to be” in the English equivalents agrees with whichever object is named first. Again, these examples may feel quite unintuitive at first. You may find it helpful to read the German sentences above repeatedly, and to try to “feel” why the indicated verb forms are correct.

2. Always remember the past participle of the main verb: note how past participles (**gegessen, gestreichelt, vergessen, geöffnet, repariert, gegeben**, etc.) occur in every Passive example on this page!

3. Choose the appropriate tense of **werden**.