

Passive Substitutes (Ersatzpassiv)

Summary	Practice Exercises
Man	Reflexive Constructions
Sich lassen + Infinitive	Sein zu + Infinitive
Related Topic: Passive	

Summary

- *Man*, reflexive constructions, *sich lassen* + infinitive and *sein zu* + infinitive can all be used as substitutes for the passive voice.
- Whereas “*man*” can generally be used whenever one could use “one” in English (as in: “One shouldn’t eat through one’s nose”), it is difficult to give a general rule for when one can use reflexive constructions, *sich lassen* + infinitive and *sein zu* + infinitive. ==> The purpose of this page is to give you the tools to understand these constructions when you see them, and thus to help you begin to develop a feeling for when one can use them [passive substitute there!] by making it possible to recognize passive substitutes when they are used in the German you hear and read.

Practice Exercises

[Passiv-Ersatz ==> Passiv](#)

[Passiv ==> Passiv-Ersatz](#)

[Deutsch ==> Englisch](#)

Man

Man is used more commonly in German than one is in English:

Wie macht man das?	How is that done?/How does one do that?
Man kann Jupiter mit bloßem Auge sehen.	Jupiter can be seen (One can see Jupiter) with the naked eye.

Notes:

If you use *man*, remember that:

(1) you should not switch to *er/sie* in the same sentence:

Wenn man nicht weiß, wie man das macht, sollte man es nicht tun.	If one doesn’t know how that is done, one shouldn’t do it.
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(2) *man* is nominative; its accusative is *einen*, dative is *einem*, and genitive is *sein*; the form *seinen* and *einem* are awkward, however, and generally avoided if possible:

Zigaretten können einen töten.	Cigarettes can kill you (one).
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Im Weltraum kann einem schnell kalt werden.	One can get cold fast in space.
Wenn man sein Auto wäscht, wird es regnen.	If one washes one's car, it will rain.

Reflexive Constructions

One can sometimes (but only sometimes!!) replace the passive with a reflexive construction:

Wie schreibt sich das?	How is that spelled?
Autofahren lernt sich leicht.	Driving is learned easily./Driving is easy to learn.

Sometimes the best translation is *can be* + passive:

Das erklärt sich so:...	This can be explained as follows:...
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Sich lassen + Infinitive

This means that something **can be done**, or that **someone lets something be done**.

Das lässt sich am besten mit einem Beispiel erklären.	This can be explained most easily with an example.
Lässt sich Alzheimer heilen?	Can Alzheimer's disease be cured?
Optimismus lässt sich lernen	Optimism can be learned.
Ich lasse mich nicht zum Narren halten [jemanden zum Narren halten = to make a fool of someone].	I will not allow myself to be made a fool of.

Note that *sich lassen* + infinitive can also mean “to have something done”—in this sense it is not a passive substitute:

Ich lasse mir die Haare schneiden.	I'm having my hair cut.
Wir lassen uns das Frühstück ins Zimmer bringen.	We're having breakfast brought to our room.

Sein zu + Infinitive

This means that something **can be done** or **must be done**, depending on the context.

Das ist nicht zu verstehen.	This cannot be understood/This is incomprehensible.
Die Hausaufgaben sind bis morgen zu machen.	The homework must be done by tomorrow.