

Grammar Reference

Active and passive

Meaning and use

In English, we can express sentences in two different ways: **active voice** and **passive voice**.

The **active voice** is used when the focus is on the **subject** (or agent) of the main verb. This is the person or thing doing the verb.

Millions of people use the internet every day.
A strong storm destroyed many houses in the village.
Only six students passed the test.

The **passive voice** is used when the **person or the thing affected** by the main verb becomes the focus.

The internet is used by millions of people every day.
Many houses in the village were destroyed by a strong storm.
The test was passed by only six students.

The **passive** is often used when the person or thing doing the verb is **not important**, **unknown**, or **obvious**. In this case, we may **leave them out** completely.

The solution was heated to 100 degrees. (agent is unimportant)
My bike was stolen last Thursday. (identity of agent is unknown)
The president was voted into office. (agent is obvious)

Form

The **active voice** is made with **subject + main verb + object**.

Bees make honey.
James Cameron directed Titanic.
Alex is repairing Bill's bicycle.

The **passive voice** is made with **subject + to be + past participle + by + object**.

Note that the active voice object becomes the passive voice subject. In the **passive**, the main verb is always the **past participle**.

Positive

Honey is made by bees.
Titanic was directed by James Cameron.
Bill's bicycle is being repaired by Alex.

Negative

We make the negative passive with **subject + negative of to be + past participle + by + object**.

Honey is not made by wasps.
Titanic wasn't directed by George Lucas.
Bill's bicycle is not being repaired by Alex.

Question

Is honey made by bees?
Was Titanic directed by James Cameron?
Is Bill's bicycle being repaired by Alex?

Take note: describing a process

We can use the **passive voice** to describe processes in which the **action** is more important than the person performing it.

*The metal sheeting was **heated** and **bent into shape** before being **cooled**, **polished**, and finally **painted**.*

Spoken English

When using the passive voice, **get** is sometimes used in place of the verb **to be**. This is especially common in informal, spoken English.

*I **got** fired for being late!*
*These letters **get** delivered first.*
*Your bike **will get** stolen if you don't lock it up.*

