Grammar Reference

Present and past passive

Meaning and use

In English, we can talk about the present and past in both the **active voice** and **passive voice**.The **active voice** focuses on the **agent** or **person or thing doing** the action.

Alice sent Mary a birthday card.

Many people listen to pop music.

The **passive voice** focuses on the **receiver** of the action.

Mary was sent a birthday card by Alice.

Pop music is listened to by many people.

We use the passive for a number of reasons. We may be **more interested in the action** than the person or thing (agent) performing the action. In this case, it may be **left out completely**.

First, the onion was washed and then sliced.

Next, it was fried and mixed with red peppers.

Finally, it was added to the beef and cooked for fifteen minutes.

We may also leave the agent out if it is **unimportant**, **unknown** or **obvious** to the listener.

The bank robbers were arrested.

David's bike was stolen last week.

No survivors were discovered at the crash site.

Form

The **passive** is made with **subject + to be + past participle**. Note that the active voice object becomes the passive voice subject. The verb **to be** is used to express both **present tense** and **past tense**.

Positive

Millions of photographs are taken every day.

The internet is used by people all over the world.

My sister was bitten by a dog.

Negative

Japanese isn't widely spoken outside Japan.

We weren't seated until well after nine o'clock.

Our new washing machine wasn't delivered on time.

Question

Were you given a name tag when you arrived?

Is your form filled out correctly?

Are these fish caught locally?

Take note: identifying the passive

Unlike in the active voice, the main verb in the passive is **always the past participle**.

In the passive, the agent or doer of a verb is always introduced with **by**.

Take note: past participle as adjective

In passive sentences, the past participle sometimes acts as an adjective.

*The restaurant was **closed** all day.*

Spoken English

While the passive is commonly used in formal or academic written English, it is more common to hear the active voice in spoken English.