

# The Passive Voice and Passive Constructions

In English and Spanish we use both the active and the passive voices to describe actions and events. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the actions. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action. An agent accomplishes the action in the passive voice. If the agent is expressed, it is introduced with the preposition *by* in English and with the preposition *por* in Spanish.

Los mecánicos repararon el auto. (active voice, subject: los mecánicos)	<i>The mechanics repaired the car.</i>
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El auto fue reparado por dos mecánicos. (passive voice, subject: el auto; agent: dos mecánicos)	<i>The car was fixed by two mechanics.</i>
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Think of the passive verb form **fue reparado** as an action performed *upon* the subject. The car *was fixed* by the agent, in this case *two mechanics*. Remember that in the passive voice the agent does not need to be named.

Los votos fueron contados.	<i>The votes were counted.</i>
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In English, grammar texts and computerized grammar checkers advise against the overuse of the passive voice. Its use is recommended in two types of situations: to express an action whose subject is unknown or when it is tactful or advantageous not to make the subject known. Note that the agent is omitted in the following two examples:

<i>The books were delivered yesterday.</i>
<i>Bad taste was shown in this decision.</i>

In the first sentence, who delivered the books is probably not known or irrelevant. In the second, the speaker has chosen not to disclose who had bad taste.

## The Passive Voice in Spanish

The use of the passive voice (**la voz pasiva**) in Spanish is similar to its use in English. Consider the following statement in the active voice: **Diego Velázquez pintó el cuadro “Las Meninas”.**

Now note the passive version of this sentence: **El cuadro “Las Meninas” fue pintado por Diego Velázquez.** In the passive voice, **el cuadro “Las Meninas”** becomes the subject receiving the action from the agent **Diego Velázquez**.

In forming sentences in the passive voice in Spanish:

- always use a form of **ser** + a past participle:

El elefante **fue atacado** por un león.

*The elephant **was attacked** by a lion.*

Las mariposas **serán dibujadas**.

*The butterflies **will be sketched**.*

- the agent may be expressed as follows:

subject + a form of **ser** + a past participle + **por** + the agent

La película fue filmada **por un director británico**.

*The movie was filmed **by a British director**.*

- or the agent may be omitted:

subject + a form of **ser** + a past participle

Después, el director **fue aclamado** en el festival de cine.

*Later, the director **was acclaimed** at the movie festival.*

In Spanish the past participle in the passive voice functions as an adjective and must agree in gender and number with the subject of the sentence. In the first two examples above, the participles **dibujadas** and **filmada** agree with **las mariposas** and **la película**, the subjects of the sentences. In the last example, **aclamado** agrees with **el director**. Note that in the last example the agent is not named.

In the above examples, the speaker uses the preterit tense (**fue**, a form of **ser**). The passive voice with **ser** may be used in any tense, but it appears most frequently in the past. You may wish to review the other tenses of the irregular verb **ser** and the irregular past participles in Units 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, and the Verb Tables.

### ejercicio

### 12-1

*Cada uno en su trabajo. Práctica. Change the sentences to the passive voice. Usa el pretérito del verbo **ser**.*

1. Carlos arregló su auto. \_\_\_\_\_
2. La profesora anuló los exámenes. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Los cocineros prepararon la cena. \_\_\_\_\_
4. El agente vendió las pólizas de seguro (*insurance policies*). \_\_\_\_\_
5. El jefe despidió a los empleados. \_\_\_\_\_

## ejercicio

12-2

*¿Cómo será la fiesta de fin de año? En español. Usa la forma pasiva del futuro del verbo ser.*

1. The food will be prepared by Helena and Paco. \_\_\_\_\_
2. The refreshments will be donated by Carla. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Cigars and cigarettes will not be allowed (**permitir**). \_\_\_\_\_
4. The gifts will be distributed. \_\_\_\_\_
5. All my friends will be invited. \_\_\_\_\_
6. The New Year will be celebrated with music. \_\_\_\_\_
7. The police will not be called (**avisar**) by my neighbors. \_\_\_\_\_

### When Is the Passive Voice Used in Spanish?

Spanish, in general, prefers the use of the active voice, especially in everyday communication. However, newscasters use the passive voice, and it appears frequently in written communication, especially in newspaper and magazine articles. The passive voice construction with **ser**:

- is used to underscore the agent who performs the action.

Los ciudadanos <b>fueron recibidos por el presidente</b> de la República de Chile.	<i>The citizens <b>were welcomed by the president</b> of the Republic of Chile.</i>
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- is used in written language, especially journalistic style. The agent is usually expressed.

Los manifestantes <b>fueron detenidos por la policía</b> .	<i>The protesters <b>were detained by the police</b>.</i>
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- appears most frequently in the past and future tenses.

El poema <b>fue escrito</b> por Pablo Neruda.	<i>The poem <b>was written</b> by Pablo Neruda.</i>
La boda <b>será celebrada</b> en el salón Primavera.	<i>The wedding <b>will be celebrated</b> at the ballroom.</i>

## ejercicio

12-3

*Un poco de historia. ¿Verdadero o falso?*

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. La radio fue inventada por Marconi.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. El básquetbol fue popularizado en los Estados Unidos.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. La Mona Lisa fue pintada por Picasso.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. La película “Los pájaros” fue dirigida por Roman Polanski.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. La frase famosa “Ser o no ser” fue pronunciada por Don Quijote.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. La Florida fue descubierta por Cristóbal Colón.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. La ciudad de Nueva York fue fundada por los alemanes.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Y la ciudad de San Agustín fue fundada por los españoles.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. El teléfono fue inventado por A. Graham Bell.

**ejercicio****12-4**

*Una noticia curiosa. Traduce. Usa el vocabulario útil.*

Last-minute news. A car with a peculiar passenger was discovered on the Avenida Simón Bolívar. A lion was seen in the backseat. The authorities were called immediately. The driver was detained by the police. The car was driven by a mysterious woman whose identity still is not known. The woman and the lion were finally identified as members of the Circo Moderno. When she was interviewed, the extravagant woman introduced her lion, Bebé. The mystery woman offered a lot of information to the press. It was revealed that Bebé wears a leash with diamonds. The incident has been considered a publicity stunt.

**vocabulario útil**

authorities	las autoridades	press	la prensa
backseat	el asiento trasero	stunt	el truco
extravagant	extravagante	to call	avisar
identity	la identidad	to detain	detener
last-minute	de última hora	to interview	entrevistar
leash	una correa	to reveal	revelar
passenger	el/la pasajero(a)	whose	cuyo/cuya

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**The Passive Construction with the Pronoun Se**


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Spanish has another passive construction that is actually used more frequently than **ser** + past participle. It is called the **pasiva pronominal** or **pasiva refleja** because one of its components is the reflexive pronoun **se**. This construction consists of the pronoun **se** + the third person of the verb, singular or plural. The verb agrees with the subject receiving the action.

**Se habla inglés.**

*English **is spoken** (here).*

**Se cierran** las puertas a las ocho.

*The doors **are closed** at eight.*

The passive construction with **se** is also an impersonal construction because the agent is never named.

## ejercicio

12-5

*¿Qué se hace en estos lugares? Escribe la letra que completa mejor la frase.*

- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| _____ 1. En la zapatería          | a. se compran sellos.                                |
| _____ 2. En el bar                | b. se sirven tapas y cerveza fría.                   |
| _____ 3. En la oficina de correos | c. se visitan los enfermos.                          |
| _____ 4. En el banco              | d. se despachan ( <i>sell</i> ) aspirinas y jarabes. |
| _____ 5. En la farmacia           | e. se deposita dinero.                               |
| _____ 6. En el hospital           | f. se venden zapatos.                                |

### When Is the Passive Construction with *Se* Used in Spanish?

Use this passive construction:

- in everyday communication.

**Se dice** que la gasolina va a subir de precio.

*It is said* that the price of gas is going up.

- if the subject is not a person.

**Se alquila** casa amueblada.

*Furnished house (is) for rent.*

- when the agent or “doer” is deliberately omitted.

**Se cometieron** muchos errores.

*Many mistakes were made.*

- to underscore an impersonal construction.

**Se pueden visitar** los lugares históricos.

*Historical places can be visited.*

## ejercicio

12-6

*Ahora te toca a ti. Contesta las preguntas.*

1. ¿Qué se lee en los periódicos? \_\_\_\_\_
2. ¿Qué se comenta en la calle? \_\_\_\_\_
3. ¿Dónde se come bien? \_\_\_\_\_
4. ¿Dónde se habla francés? \_\_\_\_\_
5. ¿Qué se compra en el mercado? \_\_\_\_\_
6. ¿Qué se bebe en tu casa? \_\_\_\_\_

## ejercicio

12-7

**En la cocina.** ¿Cómo se prepara? Usa la pasiva refleja (construcción con el pronombre *se*) y la forma apropiada del presente del verbo entre paréntesis.

1. La pasta \_\_\_\_\_ (preparar) con tomate.
2. Los espárragos \_\_\_\_\_ (servir) con aceite y limón.
3. Las papas \_\_\_\_\_ (pelar) antes de freírlas.
4. La sal \_\_\_\_\_ (añadir) con mucho cuidado.
5. Las grasas \_\_\_\_\_ (evitar) en las dietas saludables.
6. Los vegetales \_\_\_\_\_ (cortar) antes de hervirlos (*boil*).

## ejercicio

12-8

**¿Verdadero o falso?**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Se habla español en Portugal.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. En los Estados Unidos se eligen los presidentes cada cuatro años.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Se nada en una piscina.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Se ven muchos árboles en el desierto.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Se aceptan tarjetas de crédito en muchas tiendas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Se fuma en los vuelos (*flights*) internacionales.

## ejercicio

12-9

**En español.** Usa la pasiva refleja (con *se*). Observa si el verbo está en el presente, pasado o futuro.

1. Used cars are sold here. \_\_\_\_\_
2. It is said that crime does not pay. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Credit cards will not be accepted. \_\_\_\_\_
4. English and Spanish are spoken here. \_\_\_\_\_
5. The museum will be inaugurated (*inaugurar*) tomorrow. \_\_\_\_\_

## Impersonal Constructions Used to Substitute for Passive Constructions

There are other Spanish constructions in which the agent or “doer” is omitted. These include a variety of impersonal constructions. The translations below will remind you that the equivalent constructions are also very common in English. Other constructions include:

- **se** + intransitive Spanish verbs. (Intransitive verbs have no direct object.)

¿Cómo **se sale** de este laberinto?  
**Se está** muy mal en la cárcel.

*How does one leave (get out of) this labyrinth?*  
*One feels bad in jail.*

- the **tú** form with the pronoun **te**.

**Te matas** a trabajar y nadie **te ayuda**.  
*you.*

*You kill yourself working and no one helps*

- **uno** as the subject of the sentence.

¡**Uno no sabe** qué hacer!

*One does not know what to do!*

- the third-person plural form of the verb.

**Cuentan** que ella no tiene dinero.

*They say she has no money.*

### ejercicio

12-10

*En busca de un tesoro. Traduce. Usa el vocabulario útil y la pasiva refleja.*

“One gets information, prepares oneself, and looks for lost treasures at the bottom of the sea. It is known that in the waters of the Caribbean Sea many sunken treasures are found. The Spanish ship *Santa Margarita* was discovered by divers looking for treasure. More than two million dollars in gold and jewels were recovered from that ship! And from the ship *Atocha* almost fifty tons of silver and thousands of emeralds the size of a walnut! But you have to prepare yourself. You buy yourself the best diving equipment, you find an ideal spot for your adventure, and you go find your treasure.” These words were said by an expert treasure hunter. You believe these words, you buy your equipment with your credit card, you go looking for treasure, you forget about reality, you spend your life under the ocean, and you go bankrupt before you find your sunken treasure at the bottom of the sea.

### vocabulario útil

bottom	el fondo	silver	la plata
Caribbean Sea	el Mar Caribe	size	el tamaño
diver	el buzo	sunken	hundido(a), enterrado(a)
diving	el buceo	to go bankrupt	arruinar(se)
emerald	la esmeralda	to recover	recuperar
hunter	el cazador/la cazadora	ton	la tonelada
jewel	la joya	treasure	el tesoro
lost	perdido(a)	walnut	la nuez
ship	el barco, el buque		