

Explanations

Basic uses of the passive

■ Agent and instrument

The person who performs an action in a passive sentence is called the agent, introduced by *by*. The agent may or may not be mentioned.

*My purse was found by **one of the cleaners**.*

A new road has been built.

An object which causes something to happen is called an instrument, introduced by *with*.

*He was hit on the head with **a hammer**.*

■ Verbs with two objects

Verbs which have two objects can be made passive in two ways.

*I was handed **a note**. **A note** was handed to me.*

Other common verbs of this type are:

bring, give, lend, pass, pay, promise, sell, send, show, tell

■ Verbs with object and complement

Some verbs have a noun or adjective which describes their object.

*We elected Jim **class representative**.*

*Everyone considered him **a failure**.*

When these are made passive, the complement goes directly after the verb.

*Jim was elected **class representative**.*

*He was considered **a failure**.*

■ Verbs which can't be passive

Most verbs with an object (transitive verbs) can be made passive:

e.g. *drive* is transitive because one can drive **something** (a car).

However, a few transitive verbs may not be used in the passive. These include: *become, fit* (be the right size), *get, have, lack, let, like, resemble, suit*.

Verbs with no object (intransitive) can not be passive:

e.g. *fall* is intransitive, you cannot 'fall something'.

Therefore it is not possible to say 'The tree was fallen'. Instead the sentence must be active: *The tree fell*.

■ Change of focus

The passive can change the emphasis of a sentence.

Jack won the prize, (focus on Jack)

The prize was won by Jack, (focus on the prize)

Using and not mentioning the agent

■ Unknown agent

The agent is not mentioned if unknown.

*My wallet **has been taken**.*

In this case, there is no point in adding an agent: 'by somebody'.

■ Generalised agent

If the subject is 'people in general' or 'you' the agent is not mentioned.

*Bicycles are widely **used** in the city instead of public transport.*

■ Obvious agent

If the agent is obvious or has already been referred to, it is not mentioned.

*Linda **has been arrested!** (we assume by the police)*

*The company agreed to our request and a new car park **was opened**.*

■ Unimportant agent

If the agent is not important to the meaning of the sentence it is not mentioned.

*I **was advised** to obtain a visa in advance.*

■ Impersonality

Using the passive is a way of avoiding the naming of a specific person who is responsible for an action.

*It **has been decided** to reduce all salaries by 10%.*

In descriptions of processes, there is emphasis on the actions performed rather than on the people who perform them.

*Then the packets **are packed** into boxes of twenty-four.*

Practice

Correct any verb forms which are impossible or inappropriate.

- a) A lot of homes in the area have been being broken into by burglars.
have been broken into
- b) As I drove south, I could see that the old road was rebuilding.
- c) I suppose the letter will have been delivered by now.....
- d) There is nothing more annoying than been interrupted when you are speaking.....
- e) Jim was been given the sack from his new job.....
- f) Somehow without my noticing my wallet had been disappeared.
- g) The new shopping centre was opened by the local MR
- h) A lot of meetings have been held, but nothing has being decided yet.

2 Both sentences in each pair have the same meaning. Complete the second sentence.

- a) The crowd was slowly filling the huge stadium.
The huge stadium was slowly being filled by the crowd.
- b) The inventor of the computer simplified the work of the accountants.
Since the computer.....the work of accountants
.....simplified.
- c) Someone has suggested that the shop should close.
It.....that the shop should close.
- d) 'I'd take out some travel insurance if I were you, Mr Smith.'
Mr Smith.....take out some travel insurance.
- e) The waitress will bring your drinks in a moment.
Your drinks.....in a moment.
- f) Someone used a knife to open the window.
This window.....a knife.
- g) You will hear from us when we have finished dealing with your complaint.
After your complaint....., you will hear from us.
- h) An announcement of their engagement appeared in the local paper.
Their engagement.....in the local paper.
- i) Nobody ever heard anything of David again.
Nothing.....David again.
- j) They paid Sheila £1,000 as a special bonus.
£1,000.....Sheila as a special bonus.

3 Rewrite each sentence in the passive, omitting the words underlined.

- a) Someone left the phone off the hook all night.
The phone was left off the hook all night.
- b) The government has announced that petrol prices will rise tomorrow.
- c) A burglar broke into our house last week.
- d) People asked me the way three times.
- e) The fruit-pickers pick the apples early in the morning.
- f) It's time the authorities did something about this problem.
- g) Lots of people had parked their cars on the pavement.
- h) The government agreed with the report and so they changed the law.
- i) You have to fill in an application form.
- j) They don't know what happened to the ship.

4 Put each verb in brackets into an appropriate passive verb form.

- a) The boxes *have not been packed* (not/pack) yet.
- b) Your food.....(still/prepare).
- c) The new ship.....(launch) next week.
- d) Luckily by the time we got there the painting.....
(not/sell).
- e) We had to go on holiday because our house.....
(decorate).
- f) I'm afraid that next week's meeting.....(cancel).
- g) If we don't hurry, all the tickets.....(sell) by the
time we get there.
- h) All main courses.....(serve) with vegetables or
salad. At least that is what is written on the menu.
- i) The second goal.....(score) by Hughes in the 41st
minute,
- j) The cathedral.....(build) in the fourteenth century.

5 Underline any uses of the agent which are unnecessary.

- a) My jewellery has been stolen by a thief!
- b) It has been decided by the authorities that Wednesday will be a school holiday.
- c) Harry was pushed over by someone standing next to him in the queue.
- d) The goods are transported by rail to our warehouse in the Midlands.
- e) I was told by someone that you have a vacancy for a computer operator.
- f) Sue has been picked by the selectors for the national event.
- g) The letter was sent by post on the 21st of last month.
- h) The larger portrait was painted by a little-known Flemish artist.
- i) It has been agreed by everyone that no smoking should be allowed,
- j) As I arrived at the conference a note was handed to me by one of the delegates.

6 Put each verb in brackets into an appropriate passive verb form.

- a) Nothing has been seen (see) of Pauline since her car
.....(find) abandoned near Newbury last week.
- b) As our new furniture.....(deliver) on Monday
morning I'll have to stay at home to check that it
.....(not/damage) during transit.
- c) The new Alhambra hatchback, which in this country
.....(sell) under the name 'Challenger',
.....(fit) with electric windows as standard.
- d) For the past few days I.....(work) in Jack's office, as
my own office.....(redecorate).
- e) It.....(announce) that the proposed new office
block.....(now/not/build) because of the current
economic situation.
- f) A major new deposit of oil.....(discover) in the
North Sea. It.....(think) to be nearly twice the size
of the largest existing field.
- g) Pictures of the surface of the planet Venus.....
(receive) yesterday from the space probe 'Explorer' which
.....(launch) last year.
- h) A large sum.....(raise) for the Fund by a recent
charity concert but the target of £250,000.....(still/
not/reach),
- i) No decision.....(make) about any future
appointment until all suitable candidates.....
(interview).

Rewrite each sentence in a more formal style so that it contains a passive form of the word given in capitals.

- a) Sorry, but we've lost your letter. MISLAY
Unfortunately your letter has been mislaid.
- b) The police are grilling Harry down at the station. QUESTION
- c) They've found the remains of an old Roman villa nearby. DISCOVER
- d) You'll get a rise in salary after six months. RAISE
- e) They stopped playing the match after half an hour. ABANDON
- f) They stopped traffic from using the centre. BAN
- g) They took Chris to court for dangerous driving. PROSECUTE
- h) You usually eat this kind of fish with a white sauce. SERVE
- i) I don't know your name. INTRODUCE

o Put each verb in brackets into a suitable active or passive verb form.

Dear Mrs Patel,

We are delighted to inform you that you (1) *have been selected* (select) for a free holiday. According to our information, you (2).....(answer) a telephone survey last month, as a result of which your name (3).....(enter) in the holiday draw. Now our computer (4).....(choose) your name, so you and your family (5).....(invite) to spend a week in a European destination of your choice. This offer (6).....(make) on the condition that you attend a special promotions day with other lucky families in your region who (7).....(offer) a similar deal. You (8).....(ask) to attend on any Saturday next month at the Royal Hotel, Manchester. If you (9).....(interest) in attending and taking up this offer, please (10).....(detach) the slip below and return it to us as soon as possible.

- 9 Using the notes as a guide, complete the e-mail to all company staff. Put the verbs in brackets into a suitable passive verb form.

NOTES FROM MANAGEMENT MEETING

Tell staff:

We'll try flexi-time for 3 months.

After 3 months we'll get the opinions of all staff.

We'll look at feedback comments and make a decision.

We may try it for another month.

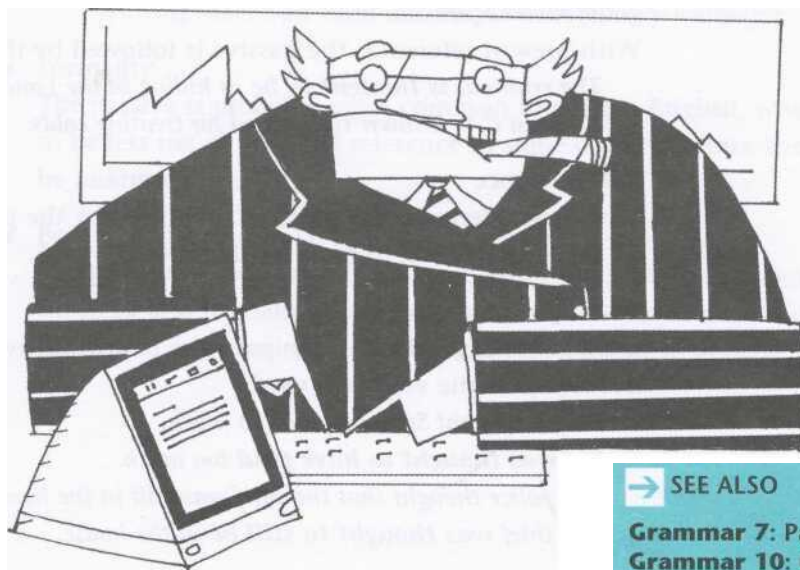
All workers will have to arrive 8-9.30.

We hope you like the idea!

FROM: The Managing Director

TO: All staff

has been decided (decide) to adopt a flexi-time system for a trial period of three months. After this period (2)..... (elapse) all members of staff (3)..... (consult) through their line manager, and feedback (4)..... (seek). Comments (5)..... (collect) and analysed before a decision (6)..... (make) as to whether the system (7)..... (adopt) permanently or not. Alternatively, the trial period (8)..... (extend) for a further month. All employees (9)..... (require) to arrive between the hours of 8.00 and 9.30, and to leave after they have fulfilled their contractual obligations of eight hours. It (10)..... (hope) that this arrangement meets with your enthusiastic approval!



→ SEE ALSO

Grammar 7: Passive 2

Grammar 10: Consolidation 2

Explanations

*Have and get
something done,
need doing*

- *Have/get* something *done*

This typically describes a service performed for us by someone else.

*I've just **had/got** my car serviced. I **have/get** it done every winter.*

It can also describe something unfortunate that happens to someone.

*We **had/got** our car broken into last month.*

Get is more likely to be used than *have* when:

- i) there is a feeling that something must be done.

*I really **must get** (have) my hair cut.*

- ii) there is a feeling of eventually managing to do something.

*I eventually **got** (had) the car fixed at the Fast Service garage.*

- iii) in orders and imperatives.

***Get** your hair cut!*

Note that *get* should not be used in the present perfect passive, where it would be confused with *have got*.

- The need to have a service done can be described with *need doing*.

*Your hair **needs cutting**.*

Passive get

Get can be used instead of *be* to form the passive in spoken language.

*Martin **got arrested** at a football match.*

Reporting verbs

- Present reference

With verbs such as *believe*, *know*, *say*, *think*, which report people's opinions, a passive construction is often used to avoid a weak subject, and to give a generalised opinion.

With present reference, the passive is followed by the present infinitive.

*The criminal **is thought to be** in hiding in the London area.*

*Vitamin C **is known to be** good for treating colds.*

- Past reference

With past reference, the passive is followed by the past infinitive.

*Smith **is believed to have left** England last week.*

- Past reporting verb

If the reporting verb is in the past, the past infinitive tends to follow, though not always if the verb *be* is used.

*People **thought Sue had paid** too much.*

*Sue **was thought to have paid** too much.*

*The police **thought that the thief was** still in the house.*

*The thief **was thought to still be** in the house.*

- Past reference with two objects

In this case there are two ways of making a passive sentence.

*Everyone knows the portrait **was painted** by an Italian.*

*The portrait **is known to have been painted** by an Italian.*

- Continuous infinitive

Past and present continuous infinitives are also used.

*Mary is thought **to be living** in Scotland.*

*The driver is thought **to have been doing** a U-turn.*

Verbs with prepositions

- Ending a sentence with a preposition

It is possible to end a sentence with a preposition in a sentence where a prepositional verb is made passive.

*Somebody broke **into** our house.*

*Our house was broken **into**.*

- *By* and *with*

With is used after participles such as *filled*, *packed*, *crowded*, *crammed*.

*The train **was packed with** commuters.*

The difference between *by* and *with* may involve the presence of a person:

*Dave was hit **by** a branch, (an accident)*

*Dave was hit **with** a branch, (a person hit him with one)*

- *Make* is followed by *to* when used in the passive.

My boss made me work hard.

*I **was made to** work hard by my boss.*

- *Cover* and verbs which involve similar ideas, such as *surround*, *decorate*, can use *with* or *by*. *Cover* can also be followed by *in*.

*The furniture **was covered in** dust.*

*The living room **had been decorated with** flowery wallpaper.*

Common contexts for the passive

- Formality

The passive is probably more common in written English, where there tends to be less use of personal reference in some contexts, since the audience may be unknown.

- Points mentioned in Grammar 6

The passive is used to change the focus of the sentence, to avoid generalised subjects, and to make an action impersonal. It is common in descriptions of processes, and in scientific and technical language in general.

Practice

1 Decide whether the sentences in each pair have the same meaning.



- a) I've just been to the hairdresser's. What do you think?
I've just cut my hair at the hairdresser's. What do you think? *different*
- b) Someone is painting our house at the moment.
We are painting our house at the moment.. . . .
- c) The dentist is going to take out two of my teeth tomorrow.
I'm having two teeth taken out tomorrow.. . . .
- d) The teacher made us all tidy up.
We were made to tidy up by the teacher.. . . .
- e) The car is thought to have been stolen by joy-riders.
Joy-riders are thought to have stolen the car.. . . .
- f) Just a minute. I'll ask someone to wrap this for you.
Just a minute. I'll have to wrap this up for you.. . . .
- g) The car hasn't been serviced for a long time.
We haven't had the car serviced for a long time.. . . .
- h) They're coming to put in a new water-heater next week.
We're putting in a new water-heater next week.. . . .
- i) Would you consider having plastic surgery to alter your nose?
Would you consider having your nose altered by plastic surgery?.....
- j) A qualified electrician checked the wiring.
We had checked the wiring with a qualified electrician.. . . .

2 Underline the correct word in each sentence.

- a) The busy shopping street was thronged by/with people.
- b) The emergency exit was concealed by/from a red curtain.
- c) The price of excursions is included in/with the cost of the holiday.
- d) All through January, the fields were covered by/from snow.
- e) The room was crammed by/with furniture of all descriptions.
- f) Two of the climbers were injured by/with falling rocks.
- g) The island is inhabited by/from people of mainly Chinese origin,
- h) The bank was quickly surrounded from/with armed police.
- i) The window had been smashed from/with a hammer taken from the shed,
- j) The stadium was packed from/with cheering fans.

3 Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. Do not change the word given.

- a) The treasure is thought to date from the thirteenth century.

date

It *is thought to date* from the thirteenth century.

- b) Your hair needs cutting.

get

You.....cut.

- c) Jill's parents are making her study hard.

made

Jill.....her parents.

- d) Apparently the ship did not sustain any damage.

appears

The ship.....any damage.

- e) It is thought that the two injured men were repairing overhead cables.

have

The two injured men.....overhead cables.

- f) There is a rumour that the escaped prisoner is living in Spain.

be

The escaped prisoner.....living in Spain.

- g) We have agreed to meet again in a fortnight.

will

It has.....meet again in a fortnight.

- h) We decided to try again later.

would

It was.....try again later.

- i) There is confirmation of Mr Jackson's intended resignation.

that

It is.....to resign.

- j) Most of the committee thought it was not a viable solution.

not

It was thought.....by most of the committee.

4 Rewrite each sentence so that it ends with the word underlined.

- a) Another company has taken over our company.
Our company has been taken over.
- b) We are dealing with your complaint.
- c) We have not accounted for all the missing passengers.
- d) Someone had tampered with the lock of the front door.
- e) We don't know how they disposed of the body.
- f) I must insist that you keep to the rules.
- g) We are looking into this allegation.
- h) We will frown upon any attempts to cheat in the exam.
- i) The youngest student complained that people were picking on him.
- j) Ann was well provided for in her husband's will.

S Complete each sentence with a suitable preposition.

- a) The tree had been decorated *with* coloured balls.
- b) The answers have been included.....the book.
- c) After the rugby match, Jim's shorts were covered.....mud.
- d) The victim was struck from behind.....a heavy object.
- e) The house was built.....money that David borrowed from the bank.
- f) The cat narrowly escaped being run over.....a car.
- g) When the accident happened, Sue was struck.....flying glass.
- h) The turkey was stuffed.....chestnuts, and was very tasty.
- i) No one knew that Peter had been involved.....the investigation.
- j) When I left the casino, my pockets were crammed.....money.

6 Complete the text using the phrases from the box.

was obliged to are believed to have been is known to have experienced
 is not known are thought to be was packed is thought to have been
 was seen were made to was brought

A plane carrying 15 members of the government to a conference in Brussels
 (1) is known to have experienced a small-scale fire earlier this morning. The
 plane (2).....about 20 minutes into its journey
 when the fire occurred in the luggage area. It
 (3).....how the plane caught fire, but initial eye-
 witness accounts confirm that a trail of smoke
 (4).....coming from the under-carriage. The fire
 (5).....rapidly under control, but the pilot
 (6).....make an emergency landing. Five people
 (7).....treated for shock. The plane
 (8).....with business people flying to Belgium.
 All 209 passengers (9).....stay behind for
 questioning after landing at a military airport in northern France. Police
 (10).....treating the incident as suspicious.

7 Rewrite the text using the passive where possible. Make sure the words underlined do not appear.

Nobody knows exactly when someone invented gunpowder. People know for a fact that the Chinese made rockets and fireworks long before people used gunpowder in Europe, which occurred at about the beginning of the thirteenth century. We generally believe that gunpowder brought to an end the 'Age of Chivalry', since anyone with a firearm could bring down a mounted knight. In fact, people did not develop efficient firearms until the sixteenth century. They used gunpowder mainly in siege cannon when people first introduced it. Later they used it in engineering work and in mining, but they found that it was extremely dangerous. Modern explosives have now replaced gunpowder, but we still use it for making fireworks, just as the Chinese did.

It is not known exactly