

Passive Voice

Use of Passive

Passive voice is used when the focus is on the action. It is not important or not known, however, who or what is performing the action.

Example: My bike was stolen.

In the example above, the focus is on the fact that my bike was stolen. I do not know, however, who did it.

Sometimes a statement in passive is more polite than active voice, as the following example shows:

Example: A mistake was made.

In this case, I focus on the fact that a mistake was made, but I do not blame anyone (e.g. You have made a mistake.).

Form of Passive

Subject + finite form of *to be* + Past Participle (3rd column of [irregular verbs](#))

Example: A letter was written.

When rewriting active sentences in passive voice, note the following:

- the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence
- the finite form of the verb is changed (*to be* + past participle)
- the subject of the active sentence becomes the object of the passive sentence (or is dropped)

Examples of Passive Level: lower intermediate

	Tense	Subject	Verb	Object
Simple Present	<i>Active:</i>	Rita	writes	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i>	A letter	is written	by Rita.
Simple Past	<i>Active:</i>	Rita	wrote	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i>	A letter	was written	by Rita.
Present Perfect	<i>Active:</i>	Rita	has written	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i>	A letter	has been written	by Rita.
Future I	<i>Active:</i>	Rita	will write	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i>	A letter	will be written	by Rita.
Hilfsverben	<i>Active:</i>	Rita	can write	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i>	A letter	can be written	by Rita.

Examples of Passive Level: upper intermediate

Tense	Subject	Verb	Object
Present	<i>Active:</i> Rita	is writing	a letter.
Progressive	<i>Passive:</i> A letter	is being written	by Rita.
Past Progressive	<i>Active:</i> Rita	was writing	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i> A letter	was being written	by Rita.
Past Perfect	<i>Active:</i> Rita	had written	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i> A letter	had been written	by Rita.
Future II	<i>Active:</i> Rita	will have written	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i> A letter	will have been written	by Rita.
Conditional I	<i>Active:</i> Rita	would write	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i> A letter	would be written	by Rita.
Conditional II	<i>Active:</i> Rita	would have written	a letter.
	<i>Passive:</i> A letter	would have been written	by Rita.

Passive Sentences with Two Objects

Level: intermediate

Rewriting an active sentence with two objects in passive voice means that one of the two objects becomes the subject, the other one remains an object. Which object to transform into a subject depends on what you want to put the focus on.

	Subject	Verb	Object 1	Object 2
<i>Active:</i>	Rita	wrote	a letter	to me.
<i>Passive:</i>	A letter	was written	to me	by Rita.
<i>Passive:</i>	I	was written	a letter	by Rita.

As you can see in the examples, adding *by Rita* does not sound very elegant. That's why it is usually dropped.

Personal and Impersonal Passive

Personal Passive simply means that the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence. So every verb that needs an object (transitive verb) can form a personal passive.

Example: They build houses. – Houses are built.

Verbs without an object (intransitive verb) normally cannot form a personal passive sentence (as there is no object that can become the subject of the passive sentence). If you want to use an intransitive verb in passive voice, you need an impersonal construction – therefore this passive is called *Impersonal Passive*.

Example: he says – it is said

Impersonal Passive is not as common in English as in some other languages (e.g. German, Latin). In English, *Impersonal Passive* is only possible with verbs of perception (e. g. say, think, know).

Example: They say that women live longer than men. – It is said that women live longer than men.

Although *Impersonal Passive* is possible here, *Personal Passive* is more common.

Example: They say that women live longer than men. – Women are said to live longer than men.

The subject of the subordinate clause (women) goes to the beginning of the sentence; the verb of perception is put into passive voice. The rest of the sentence is added using an infinitive construction with 'to' (certain auxiliary verbs and *that* are dropped).

Sometimes the term *Personal Passive* is used in English lessons if the indirect object of an active sentence is to become the subject of the passive sentence.