

The Passive Voice

Let's look at this sentence:

- I drank two cups of coffee.

This is an **active** sentence and it has the subject first (the person or thing that does the verb), followed by the verb, and finally the object (the person or thing that the action happens to).

So, in this example, the subject is 'I', the verb is 'drank' and the object is 'two cups of coffee'.

But, we don't always need to make sentences this way. We might want to put the object first, or perhaps we don't want to say who did something. This can happen for lots of reasons. In this case, we can use a **passive**, which puts the object first:

- Two cups of coffee were drunk .

How to make the Passive in English

We make the passive by putting the verb 'to be' into whatever tense we need and then adding the past participle. For regular verbs, we make the past participle by adding '**ed**' to the infinitive. So 'play' becomes 'played' whereas, for irregular verbs 3rd column (See becomes seen.)

We use the passive voice when the subject of the sentence is the receiver of the action

EXAMPLES	EXPLANATION
Popcorn is sold in movie theaters. Old movies were filmed in black and white. Many movies have been made in Hollywood.	Passive verb = a form of be + past participle
subject verb object Active: The children saw the movie. Subject verb by + agent Passive: The movie was seen by the children.	Compare active and passive: The active sentence (movie) is the subject of the passive sentence. If the agent of the action (the person who performs the action) is mentioned, it follows by

Tense	Active	Passive
present simple	I make a cake.	A cake is made (by me).
present continuous	I am making a cake.	A cake is being made (by me).
past simple	I made a cake.	A cake was made (by me).
past continuous	I was making a cake.	A cake was being made by me).
present perfect	I have made a cake.	A cake has been made (by me).
present perfect continuous	I have been making a cake.	A cake has been being made (by me).
past perfect	I had made a cake.	A cake had been made (by me).
future simple	I will make a cake.	A cake will be made (by me).
future perfect	I will have made a cake.	A cake will have been made (by me).

Notes: 1. Both the active voice and the passive voice can be used with different tenses and with modals. The tense of the passive sentence is shown in the verb be. Use the past participle with every tense.

2. If two verbs in the passive voice are connected with and, do not repeat be. The Oscar ceremony **is** televised and **seen** by millions of people.

Verbs with two objects

Some verbs that have two objects can make two different active sentences and so two different passive sentences too. For example, the verb 'give' is like this:

- Active: He gave me the book / He gave the book to me.

You can choose either of the two objects to be the subject of the passive sentence.

- Passive: I was given the book (by him)/. The book was given to me (by him).

Other verbs like this are: ask, offer, teach, tell, lend, promise, sell, throw.

Read the following magazine article. Underline the verbs in the passive voice

The Academy Awards are given out every year to recognize outstanding work of movie actors, directors, and others who are part of the movie-making industry. These awards, called Oscars, are presented in a formal ceremony in Hollywood. Several people are nominated in specific categories, such as Best Movie, Best Actor, Best Music, and Best Costumes. One nominee is chosen to receive an award in each category. When the awards ceremony started in 1929, 15 awards were presented and the ceremony was attended by only 250 people. Tickets cost \$10, and anyone who could afford a ticket could attend. Today about two dozen Oscars are presented. Tickets are no longer sold to the general public; invitations are sent only to people involved in making the movies and to their guests. Today the awards are presented in the 3400-seat Kodak Theatre in Hollywood. Until 1941, the winners' names were already known before the ceremony and published in newspapers the night before the ceremony. Now the winners' names are placed in sealed envelopes and the envelopes are not opened until the night of the ceremony. Since 1953, Oscar night has been televised and broadcast all over the world. This show is seen by hundreds of millions of people. Viewers watch as their favorite movie stars arrive looking beautiful and hopeful.

When should we use the passive?

1) When we want to change the focus of the sentence:

- The Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. (We are more interested in the painting than the artist in this sentence)

2) When who or what causes the action is unknown or unimportant or obvious or 'people in general':

- He was arrested (obvious agent, the police).
- My bike has been stolen (unknown agent).
- The road is being repaired (unimportant agent).
- The form can be obtained from the post office (people in general).

3) In factual or scientific writing:

- The chemical is placed in a test tube and the data entered into the computer.

4) In formal writing instead of using someone/ people/ they (these can be used in speaking or informal writing):

- The brochure will be finished next month.

5) In order to put the new information at the end of the sentence to improve style:

- Three books are used regularly in the class. The books were written by Dr. Bell. ('Dr. Bell wrote the books' sound clumsy)

6) When the subject is very long:

- I was surprised by how well the students did in the test. (More natural than: 'how well the students did in the test surprised me')