

# The passive voice: all tenses

## Introduction



Gifts **are given** at Christmas.

## Uses

We use the passive because, in English, we often place the most important part of a sentence at the beginning. Consider these two sentences which give the same information:

1. "The storm damaged my roof last night." [active] This is part of a conversation about a storm. The storm is the focus of the conversation so it is placed at the beginning of the sentence.
2. "My roof **was damaged** in the storm last night." [passive] Here, the topic of conversation is the roof. The roof didn't 'do' anything but it is placed at the beginning of the sentence because the speaker wants to focus on it.

### Note that

The person or thing that performs an action is sometimes called 'the **agent**'. We often omit the **agent** completely.

My roof **was damaged** last night.

| Uses   | Examples   |
|--|--|
| The object is more important than the subject. | My roof <b>was damaged</b> (by the storm).<br><br>English <b>is spoken</b> in Australia and New Zealand. |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>We don't know who or what performed an action.</b></p>  | <p>Last night, the bank in the High Street <b>was robbed</b> and £250,000 <b>was stolen</b>.</p>  |
| <p><b>It is obvious who performed an action so we do not need to mention the <b>agent</b>.</b></p>                | <p>Two men <b>were arrested</b> this morning. [We know it must be by the police.]</p> <p>He <b>was sent off</b> in the match against South Africa. [by the referee, of course]</p>  |
| <p><b>An action is performed by people in general.</b></p>  | <p>The coast of France <b>can be seen</b> from England on a clear day. [by anyone]</p>  |
| <p><b>It doesn't matter who performs the action - the <b>agent</b> isn't relevant to the topic.</b></p>           | <p>Coffee <b>is grown</b> in Brazil.</p> <p>[The topic is coffee; the individual farmers are not important here.]</p>   |
| <p><b>We don't want to mention the <b>agent</b>.</b></p>  | <p>I <b>was told</b> to do it like that! [I've done something wrong but I don't want to cause trouble for the colleague who gave me the wrong instructions]</p> <p>Where did you get that necklace? Oh, it <b>was given</b> to me ages ago. [by an ex-boyfriend but I don't want to tell you that!]</p> <p>"Mistakes <b>were made</b>." - Ronald Reagan</p> |
| <p><b>People in positions of authority, such as politicians, want to distance themselves from the action.</b></p> | <p>The budget <b>has been altered</b> to reflect current trends.</p> <p>Appropriate action <b>was taken</b>.</p> <p>The situation <b>is being dealt with</b>.</p> <p>Steps <b>will be taken</b> to address the issues.</p>  |

The process or principle is the most important thing - in scientific or academic writing, for example.

Calcium carbonate **is put** into a test tube. About 10 cm<sup>3</sup> hydrochloric acid **is added** and the bung quickly **replaced**.

An earthquake happens when energy in the Earth's crust **is suddenly released** and seismic waves **are created**.

Flour, sugar and eggs **are mixed** together.

## Structure

| Tense or modal         | Subject    | 'to be'                             | Past participle |
|------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Present simple         | The car(s) | is/are                              | sold in Europe. |
| Present continuous     | The car(s) | is/are being                        | sold in Europe. |
| Past simple            | The car(s) | was/were                            | sold in Europe. |
| Past continuous        | The car(s) | was/were being                      | sold in Europe. |
| Present perfect simple | The car(s) | has/have been                       | sold in Europe. |
| Past perfect simple    | The car(s) | had been                            | sold in Europe. |
| Future simple          | The car(s) | will be                             | sold in Europe. |
| Future "going to"      | The car(s) | is going to be                      | sold in Europe. |
| Future perfect simple  | The car(s) | will have been                      | sold in Europe. |
| Might/May              | The car(s) | might/may be<br>might/may have been | sold in Europe. |
| Could                  | The car(s) | could be<br>could have been         | sold in Europe. |
| Can                    | The car(s) | can be                              | sold in Europe. |
| Should                 | The car(s) | should be<br>should have been       | sold in Europe. |

|                 |                   |   |                        |
|-----------------|-------------------|---|------------------------|
| <b>Ought to</b> | <b>The car(s)</b> | <b>ought to be<br/>ought to have been</b> | <b>sold in Europe.</b> |
| <b>Would</b>    | <b>The car(s)</b> | <b>would be<br/>would have been</b>       | <b>sold in Europe.</b> |
| <b>Must</b>     | <b>The car(s)</b> | <b>must be<br/>must have been</b>         | <b>sold in Europe.</b> |
| <b>Have to</b>  | <b>The car(s)</b> | <b>have to be<br/>had to be</b>           | <b>sold in Europe.</b> |
| <b>Need</b>     | <b>The car(s)</b> | <b>need(ed) to be</b>                     | <b>sold in Europe.</b> |
| <b>Used to</b>  | <b>The car(s)</b> | <b>used to be</b>                         | <b>sold in Europe.</b> |

We form negative sentences by making the verb 'to be' negative. The past participle remains unchanged.

I live in France but I **wasn't born** there.

She **hasn't been promoted** since 1998.

He **isn't getting treated** well in his new job.

The meeting **can't be held** this week.

The order **needn't be sent** until the end of the week.

We form questions using the usual rules. [See rules for **making questions**.]

**Was** the job **finished** on time?

**Has** lunch **been prepared** yet?

Where **will** the meeting **be held**?

How **is** cheese **made**?

Who **is invited**?

## Using 'by'

Sometimes, we use the word 'by' to add information about the **agent**.

The Internet **is used by** nearly two thousand million people worldwide.

This building **was designed** by a famous architect.

More men than women **are employed** by this company.

In these sentences, we are still placing the important part of the sentence at the beginning.

## Formal and informal

The passive is used in both formal and informal situations.

New laws **are expected to be introduced** in this Parliament that will link pension payments to life expectancy. [The Times 25/6/2010]

I have to get the train to work today because my car's **being repaired**.

I **was born** in London.

## Get

For informal communication, we sometimes use **get** instead of **to be**.

This bridge **gets repainted** every 5 years.

The boys were playing football in the garden again and a window **got broken**.  
Luckily, no one **got hurt** this time!

## Transitive and intransitive verbs

Only transitive verbs have a passive form.

| Active   | Passive                                     |
|--|---|
| They sent a letter.  | A letter <b>was sent</b> .                  |
| They're decorating our office.                                       | Our office <b>is being decorated</b> .      |
| We're going to raise our targets.                                    | Our targets <b>are going to be raised</b> . |
| The sun rises in the east.   |   |
| <b>Note that</b> some verbs can be both transitive and intransitive: |   |

The water boiled. [i]

Some water **was boiled**.

I boiled some water. [t]

## Different forms

Sometimes there are two possible active and passive forms depending on the emphasis.

| Active   | Passive   |
|--|---|
| <p>When I left my last job, they gave me a gift. ✓✓</p> <p>[object (me) +object (a gift)] ✓✓</p> | <p>I <b>was given</b> a gift. ✓✓</p> <p>[This one sounds more natural.]</p>   |
| <p>When I left my last job, they gave a gift to me. ✓</p> <p>[correct but less common]</p>       | <p>A gift <b>was given</b> to me. ✓</p> <p>[Correct but less common - we might use this if, for example, we're stressing "me."]</p> |
| <p>Other similar verbs include: lend, offer, sell, send, show, teach, tell and throw.</p>        |   |

However, with some verbs, object + object is not possible and so there is only one active form and one passive form.

| Active   | Passive   |
|--|---|
| <p>He explained the figures to me. ✓</p>   | <p>The figures <b>were explained</b> to me. ✓</p> |
| <p>He explained me the figures. ✗</p>  | <p>I was explained the figures. ✗</p>             |
| <p>Other similar verbs include: deliver, demonstrate, describe, introduce, mention, report, say and suggest.</p> |   |

## Passive gerunds

There are different forms of passive gerunds.

| Form and rules | Examples |
|----------------|----------|
|----------------|----------|

**'being' + past participle**

He doesn't like **being told** what to do.

**Being elected** by my peers was very rewarding.

They enjoy **being shown** the sites in Paris.

He avoids **being seen** when he arrives late.

Other verbs which can be used before 'being' include: hate, imagine, remember and resent.

**Note that** these verbs do not have corresponding meanings in active and passive sentences.

When the active form consists of verb + object + gerund.

They caught him stealing.

He **was caught** stealing.

His boss heard him making a private call.

He **was heard** making a private call.

**Note that** these are only possible when the subject and object are people.

## Passive with infinitive

This consists of the infinitive of 'to be' + past participle.

He asked **to be contacted** immediately if the situation changed.

The longer they knew him the more he came **to be respected** by his colleagues.

He chose **to be given** an extra week's holiday instead of a pay rise.

My car needs **to be washed**.

She hopes **to be invited**.

It has **to be finished** today.

# Reported passive

We can use a passive form to report what someone thinks or says:

It **is thought** that he's living in Spain.

He **is thought** to be living in Spain.

Hundreds of people **are believed** to have been killed in the earthquake.

She **was said** to have resigned from the government.

It **has been suggested** that we hold another meeting next week.

It **is thought** that red wine **shouldn't be drunk** with fish.



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