

# 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).  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 might/may have been	sold in Europe.
Could	The car(s)	could be could have been	sold in Europe.
Can	The car(s)	can be	sold in Europe.
Should	The car(s)	should be should have been	sold in Europe.

<b>Ought to</b>	<b>The car(s)</b>	<b>ought to be ought to have been</b>	<b>sold in Europe.</b>
<b>Would</b>	<b>The car(s)</b>	<b>would be would have been</b>	<b>sold in Europe.</b>
<b>Must</b>	<b>The car(s)</b>	<b>must be must have been</b>	<b>sold in Europe.</b>
<b>Have to</b>	<b>The car(s)</b>	<b>have to be 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
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**'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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