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 was damaged (by the storm).** **English is spoken in Australia and New Zealand.**

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

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^3 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.**

Ought to	**The car(s)**	**ought to be** **ought to have been**	**sold in Europe.**
Would	**The car(s)**	**would be** **would have been**	**sold in Europe.**
Must	**The car(s)**	**must be** **must have been**	**sold in Europe.**
Have to	**The car(s)**	**have to be** **had to be**	**sold in Europe.**
Need	**The car(s)**	**need(ed) to be**	**sold in Europe.**
Used to	**The car(s)**	**used to be**	**sold in Europe.**

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 was sent.
They're decorating our office.	Our office is being decorated.
We're going to raise our targets.	Our targets are going to be raised.
The sun rises in the east.	
Note that some verbs can be both transitive and intransitive:	

The water boiled. [i] **I boiled some water. [t]**	**Some water was boiled.**

Different forms

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

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

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

Active	Passive
He explained the figures to me. ✓	**The figures were explained to me.** ✓
He explained me the figures. ✗	**I was explained the figures.** ✗
Other similar verbs include: deliver, demonstrate, describe, introduce, mention, report, say and suggest.	

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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