

The passive voice: present tenses

Introduction



Gifts **are given** at Christmas.

Definition

The passive voice is used when the focus is on the action. It is not important or not known who or what is performing the action.

Construction

The passive consists of a subject + 'to be' + past participle.

We can use any tense or form of the verb 'to be'.

Affirmative

We form affirmative sentences by using the affirmative form of the verb 'to be'. The past participle of the main verb remains unchanged.

Tigers **are** found in Asia.

He **is getting treated** well in his new job.

The meeting **is held** every Monday.

Negative

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

Tigers **aren't found** in Africa.

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

Our meetings **aren't held** on Mondays.

Interrogative

We form questions using the usual rules.

Are tigers **found** in Africa?

Where **are** the meetings **being held**?

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

Who **is** **invited**?

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. "Mexicans speak Spanish." [active] This is part of a conversation about Mexicans. They are the focus of the conversation and so the word is placed at the beginning of the sentence.
2. "Spanish is spoken in Mexico" [passive] Here, the topic of conversation is the Spanish language. The language doesn't 'do' anything but it is placed at the beginning of the sentence because the speaker wants to focus on it.

The passive voice is used when	Examples
The object is more important than the subject.	English is spoken in Australia and New Zealand.
We don't know who or what performs an action.	The staff are worried because money is being stolen from their offices.

It is obvious who performed an action so we do not need to mention the agent.	<p>About 100 arrests are made in London every year based on evidence from street cameras.</p> <p>[We know it is the police who arrest people so it is not necessary to mention them.]</p>
An action is performed by people in general.	<p>The coast of France can be seen from England on a clear day.</p> <p>[by anyone]</p>
It doesn't matter who performs the action - the agent isn't relevant to the topic.	<p>Coffee is grown in Brazil.</p> <p>[The topic is coffee; the individual farmers who grow this coffee are not important here.]</p>
People in positions of authority, such as politicians, want to distance themselves from the action.	<p>Appropriate action is being taken.</p> <p>The situation is being dealt with.</p> <p>Steps are being taken to address the issues.</p>
The process or principle is most important - in scientific or academic writing, for example.	<p>Calcium carbonate is put into a test tube. About 10 cm³ hydrochloric acid is added and the bung quickly replaced.</p> <p>An earthquake happens when energy in the Earth's crust is suddenly released and seismic waves are created.</p> <p>Flour, sugar and eggs are mixed together.</p>

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.

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.

Further information

The passive is used in both formal and informal situations.

Subsidies **are being introduced** to help disadvantaged students. [The Independent 10/2/2011]

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

She's **liked** by all her colleagues.

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

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

"He hates playing rugby because he's always **getting injured**!"

Only transitive verbs have a passive form.

Active	Passive
They're decorating our office.	Our office is being decorated . ✓
The sun rises in the east.	✗
Note that some verbs can be both transitive and intransitive:	
Water boils at 100°c. [i]	✗
I'm boiling some water. [t]	Some water is being boiled . ✓



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