

Lesson 15: Passive Voice

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence **DOES the action**:

- **Jake wrote** a **letter**.
subject / verb / object

In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence **is acted upon**:

- **A letter was written** (by **Jake**).
subject / verb

Notice that the **object** of the active sentence (letter) became the **subject** of the passive sentence.

If we want, we can include "by Jake" to say who did the action.

We do not include "by..." when:

- The doer of the action is **unknown**:
The money was stolen.
- The doer of the action is **"people in general"**:
Black cats are believed to bring bad luck.
- The doer of the action is **completely unimportant**:
This bridge was built in 1889. (probably by a construction company)

[Click here](#) for more explanation and examples).

The passive voice is formed by **a form of the verb TO BE + past participle of the main verb**.

The form of the verb "to be" is the same as the form of the original main verb:

Structure of the passive voice

Let's see if you can guess how to form the passive voice for each tense. I'll show you the active voice sentence, and you'll have 7 seconds to try to complete the passive sentence before the answer appears.

Tense	Active / Passive	When to use it?
Simple Present	Factory workers test the products.	General procedures & processes; general thoughts & opinions
	The products are tested .	
Simple past	An interior design company renovated our facilities last month.	Actions completed at a specific time in the past.
	Our facilities were renovated last month.	
Simple future	Everyone will exchange gifts at Christmas. The company is going to implement the policy next month.	Actions to be completed in the future
	Gifts will be exchanged at Christmas. The policy is going to be implemented next month.	
Present continuous	Teachers are using the new book in their classrooms.	Actions currently in progress
	The new book is being used in classrooms.	

Past continuous	I spoke up when I saw that my manager was ignoring the safety regulations.	Actions in progress at a time in the past
	I spoke up when I saw that the safety regulations were being ignored .	
Present perfect	Somebody has eaten the last piece of cake.	Actions completed at an unspecified time in the past.
	The last piece of cake has been eaten .	
Past perfect	I discovered that someone had copied my brilliant idea.	An action that happened before another action in the past.
	I discovered that my brilliant idea had been copied .	
Future perfect	The store will have delivered the furniture by Friday.	An action that will happen before a date in the future
	The furniture will have been delivered by Friday.	

Note that the form of the verb "to be" is singular or plural depending on the new subject of the sentence:

Teachers **are using** the new book in their classrooms.
(teachers = plural, so we use "are")

The new book **is being used** in classrooms.
(the new book = singular, so we use "is")

My manager **was ignoring** the safety regulations.
(*my manager = singular, so we use "was"*)

The safety regulations **were being ignored**.
(*regulations = plural, so we use "were"*)

Modal Verbs + Passive Voice

We can also add modal verbs to passive structures - typically:

- the **present** (modal + be + past participle)
To talk about things in the present or future
- the **present perfect** (modal + have been + past participle)
To talk about things in the past

Possibility:

- Present: This recipe **can be made** with margarine instead of butter.
- Past: He's very upset. He **might have been fired** from his job.
- Past: That was very dangerous. You **could have been killed!**

Impossibility:

- Present: Crops **can't be grown** here because the soil is too rocky.
- Past: The work **couldn't have been finished** in a day. It was at least a week's worth of work.

Permission:

- Positive: Photos **may be taken** during the performance.
- Negative: Cell phones **may not be used** in the classroom.

Requirement:

- Positive: The shipment **must be delivered** before the deadline.
- Negative: These samples **must not be exposed** to contamination.

Advice:

- Present: Something **should be done** about the problem.
- Past: Something **should have been done** about the problem a long time ago.
- Present: Criminals **ought to be punished**.
(we don't usually use "ought to have been" in the past; we prefer "should have been")

When can/can't we use the passive voice?

Some teachers and writers say that the passive voice should always be avoided, but this is not true. Of course it is not good to use the passive voice *too much*, but it is perfectly acceptable to use it - especially in these four situations:

1. When we don't know who did the action

A laptop **was stolen** from the classroom.

Three people **have been killed** in the park. Police are looking for clues to the identity of the murderer.

2. When the person who does the action is "people in general"

Tino's **is considered** the city's best pizzeria.

Chinese **is seen** as a very difficult language to learn.

It **was** once **believed** that the sun revolved around the earth.

3. When the person who does the action is obvious or unimportant

She **is being treated** for cancer.
(by doctors and nurses, obviously)

Bill Clinton **was elected** president in 1993.
(by the country's population, obviously)

All articles **are proofread** before publication.
(who proofreads them is not important... probably a team of editors)

4. When we want to give **MORE emphasis to the receiver of the action than to the doer**

Sometimes we *do* want to mention who did the action, because it is interesting or important in some way... but we still want to keep the *primary* focus of attention on the object of the action:

The Taj Mahal **was built** by the emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife.
(we are learning primarily about the Taj Mahal, so we keep the attention on it)



My mother **is being treated** for cancer by one of the best doctors in the country.
(the most important person in this sentence is my mother, not the doctor)

This software **has been used** by more than 50,000 small businesses.
(we want to emphasize how great the software is; the small businesses are a secondary detail)

We can't use the passive voice with **intransitive verbs** (verbs that have no object):

He fixed the clock.

(fixed = transitive; the clock = the object)

The clock was fixed.

He laughed.

They're coming over.

An accident has happened.

(laugh, come, happen = intransitive. There are no objects; therefore there is no possibility of making these sentences into the passive voice)

With state verbs, some of them can be used in the passive voice and others cannot.

Verbs that can be used in the passive voice include **need, know, include, involve, love, hate, see, hear, feel.**

We need new tools.
New tools are needed.

Everyone in the country **knows her name.**
Her name is known throughout the country.

The price includes tax.
Tax is included in the price.

This job involves manual labor.
Manual labor is involved in this job.

People love/hate the band's music.
The band's music is loved/hated.

People often **see birds** in the forest.
Birds are often **seen** in the forest.

Verbs that cannot be used in the passive voice include **have** (for possession), **belong to**, **lack**, **resemble**, **appear**, **seem**, **look**, **be**.

I have a cat.
~~A cat is had by me.~~

The team lacked a leader.
~~A leader was lacked by the team.~~

That cloud resembles a dragon.
~~A dragon is resembled by that cloud.~~

This task seems difficult.
(no passive sentence is possible)

You can use the passive voice with transitive phrasal verbs:

He took the files out of the archives.
The files were taken out of the archives.

Someone has put away the tools.

The tools have been put away.

Some phrasal verbs are intransitive. It is not possible to create sentences in the passive voice with these, because there is no object:

The car slowed down.

He is running away.

Summary

- In the active voice, the subject of the sentence **DOES** the action. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence **is acted upon**.
- The passive voice is formed by **a form of the verb TO BE + past participle of the main verb**. The verb TO BE can be conjugated in various tenses.
- You can use a **modal verb + be + past participle** (for things in the present/future) - Ex) Something should be done about this problem.
- You can use a **modal verb + have been + past participle** (for things in the past) - Ex) Something should have been done about this problem a long time ago.
- The passive voice is used when the person who did the action is **unknown, obvious/unimportant, "people in general," or less important than the object**.
- We can include "by... (the doer)" if we know who did the action and want to mention it because it is somewhat important.
- We **can't use** the passive voice with intransitive verbs and some state verbs.
- We **can use** the passive voice with transitive phrasal verbs.

You've finished Lesson 15! Now continue to the exercises to get more practice with the passive voice.

Quiz – Lesson 15 – Passives

Exercise 1: Passive voice – various verb tenses

Change these sentences to the passive voice, using **a form of the verb be + past participle of the main verb**. Warning – three of them can't be made passive.

Ex) Somebody gave me a form to fill out.

Passive: **I was given a form to fill out.**

1. Some people are having trouble understanding the instructions.

2. Someone will announce the winner of the contest tomorrow.

3. People report that the damage from the earthquake is extensive.

4. Hopefully, scientists will have cured cancer by the year 2050.

5. I was surprised when I heard that they had approved my scholarship application.

6. People are debating this issue around the world.

7. Journalists were bombarding the actor with questions.

8. Nobody has painted these walls yet.

9. Somebody finally took down the office Christmas decorations in February.

10. The government has passed a new law.

11. The course consists of 40 classes.

12. We held the event in a conference center.

13. Farm workers harvest the crops in October.

14. This club has existed for the past five years.

15. I'm not very athletic. Other kids always chose me last for sports teams.

Exercise 2: Passives with Modal Verbs

Complete each sentence with a **modal verb + be / have been + past participle**.

The modal verbs you can use are **must, might, may, can, could, and should**

Ex) The laws _____ (*obey*) by everyone, regardless of social status.
(*obligation - present*)

Answer: The laws **must be obeyed** by everyone, regardless of social status.

1. Karen hasn't come to work for the past week. She _____
(*fire*) - I'm not sure. (*uncertainty - past*)

2. This watch is so strong, it _____ (*drop*) from a height of 40 feet
without breaking. (*possibility - present*)

3. Cameras with flash _____ (*use*) during the performance.
(*prohibited - present*)

4. Papers _____ (*turn*) in by April 15. No assignments will
be accepted after the deadline. (*obligation - present*)

5. Some people _____ (*offend*) by the strong language in the movie. (*possibility - present*)
6. My air conditioner is broken. _____ it _____, or will I have to buy a new one? (*ability - present*)
7. I think that new immigrants _____ (*give*) more help and support. (*recommendation - present*)
8. I can't believe he got away with the crime! He _____ (*punish*). (*recommendation - past*)
9. If we had known about this problem earlier, it _____ (*resolve*). (*possibility - past*)
10. Some mysteries just _____ (*solve*). (*impossibility - present*)
11. Why is my trash can still full? It _____ (*empty*) by the cleaning crew. (*expectation - past*)
12. If you talk too fast, some of your words _____ (*misunderstand*). (*possibility - present*)

Writing Task

Write about one significant historical or cultural event in your country. When appropriate, you can use the passive voice. Send me your text at shayna@espressoenglish.net for feedback!

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Answers – Quiz 15 - Passives

Exercise 1:

1. Cannot be passive
2. The winner of the contest will be announced tomorrow.
3. It is reported that the damage from the earthquake is extensive.
Or: The damage from the earthquake is reported to be extensive.
4. Hopefully, cancer will have been cured by the year 2050.
5. I was surprised when I heard that my scholarship application had been approved.
6. This issue is being debated around the world.
7. The actor was being bombarded with questions.
8. These walls haven't been painted yet.
9. The Christmas decorations were finally taken down in February.
10. A new law has been passed.
11. Cannot be passive
12. The event was held in a conference center.
13. The crops are harvested in October.
14. Cannot be passive
15. I'm not very athletic. I was always chosen last for team sports.

Exercise 2:

1. Karen hasn't come to work for the past week. She **might/may have been fired** - I'm not sure.
2. This watch is so strong, it **can be dropped** from a height of 40 feet without breaking.
3. Cameras with flash **may not / can't be used** during the performance.
4. Papers **must be turned** in by April 15. No assignments will be accepted after the deadline.
5. Some people **might/could/may be offended** by the strong language in the movie.
6. My air conditioner is broken. **Can it be fixed**, or will I have to buy a new one?
7. I think that new immigrants **should be given** more help and support.
8. I can't believe he got away with the crime! He **should have been punished**.
9. If we had known about this problem earlier, it **could have been resolved**.
10. Some mysteries just **can't be solved**.
11. Why is my trash can still full? It **should have been emptied** by the cleaning crew. (*expectation – past*)
12. If you talk too fast, some of your words **might/could/may be misunderstood**.