

Using the Passive Voice

VOA Learning English

6-7 minutes

This Everyday Grammar is all about the passive voice. The passive is a verb form in which the subject receives the action of the verb. For example, "I was born on a Saturday."

Most sentences in English follow the *subject-verb-object* pattern known as the **active** voice. For example, "I love you." In this example the subject is "I," the verb is "love" and the object is "you." The subject performs the action of the verb.

But sometimes the subject is acted upon, or *receives* the action of the verb. This is called the **passive** voice. Imagine that someone stole your wallet, but you do not know who did it. You could say, "My wallet was stolen." In this passive sentence, "my wallet" is the subject, "was stolen" is the verb. There is no direct object - the wallet did not steal itself. The speaker does not know who stole the wallet.

To form the passive, use a form of the verb "be" followed by a past participle verb form. You can form the passive in several verb tenses, but the simple present and simple past are the most common.

Only **transitive** verbs can be passive. **Intransitive** verbs, or verbs that cannot take a direct object, cannot be passive. You cannot say "I was arrived by train" because the intransitive verb *arrive* cannot be followed by an object.

Most of the time, users should avoid the passive voice. The passive voice can make the speaker or writer seem indirect and weak. Which would you rather hear: "I love you" (active voice) or "You are loved by me" (passive voice)?

But there are several situations when you *should* use the passive.

The most common reason to use the passive is when the **actor** is unknown or unimportant. For example, "My visa was processed," and "My shoes were made in India" and "The car was imported from Germany." In these examples, it is not necessary to know exactly who performed the action.

Sometimes speakers use the passive even when they know the person who did the action. In this case, use the word *by* followed by the actor.

For example, "*Great Expectations* was written by Charles Dickens." You could also use the active voice: "Charles Dickens wrote *Great Expectations*." Both are correct. The passive voice emphasizes the book; the active voice emphasizes the writer.

In informal speech, the verb "be" can be replaced with the verb "get." For example, instead of saying "I was hit by a car," you can say, "I got hit by a car." Listen to this famous song by the Eurythmics. You will hear two active and two passive sentences.



Annie Lennox and Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics perform in Los Angeles in 2014 (AP).

Some of them want to use you
Some of them want to get used by you
Some of them want to abuse you
Some of them want to be abused

Notice how singer Annie Lennox used the passive with both "get" and "be."

Another reason to use the passive is to avoid naming the person who performed an action. This is common in politics and law.

At times, powerful people want to admit to a mistake without blaming specific people. In this case, they often use the passive phrase "mistakes were made." Listen to a TV interview with President Obama. A reporter asked the president about a report of abuses by the Central Intelligence Agency. Here is how President Obama replied:

"Any fair-minded person looking at this would say that some terrible mistakes were made."

And here is President George W. Bush using the same phrase. A reporter asked him about the firing of some prosecutors.

"And he's right, mistakes were made. And I'm frankly not happy about them."

You might hear the passive voice in a courtroom. For legal reasons, sometimes lawyers have to use the passive voice to avoid directly blaming a suspect for a crime. Listen to this courtroom dialog from a popular TV drama *The Good Wife*. A prosecutor is accusing a person of killing a man named Wagner.

Prosecutor: And how did he kill Wagner?

Defense attorney: Objection!

Prosecutor: Withdrawn. How was Wagner killed?

Did you notice how the prosecutor switched his question from the active to the passive voice? Listen one more time.

Prosecutor: And how did he kill Wagner?

Defense attorney: Objection!

Prosecutor: Withdrawn. How was Wagner killed?

At the beginning of the clip, the prosecutor asked, "How did he kill Wagner?" The defense attorney objected to the question. The prosecutor rephrased the question in the passive voice to avoid blaming the suspect. He asked, "How was Wagner killed?"

Overusing the passive voice is major problem in student writing, even for native speakers. Try to keep your passive sentences under 10 percent of your total. Try converting some of your long sentences into simple subject-verb-object sentences.

There is much more to learn about the passive, including the stative passive and participle adjectives. We'll address those topics in a future episode of Everyday Grammar. Until then, sweet dreams!

Sweet dreams are made of this

Who am I to disagree?

I've traveled the world and the seven seas

Everybody's looking for something...

I'm Jonathan Evans.

And I'm Ashley Thompson.

Adam Brock wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Jill Robbins was the editor.

Words in This Story

active – *grammatical term.* When the verb of a sentence is in the active voice, the subject is doing the acting, as in the sentence "Kevin hit the ball." Kevin (the subject of the sentence) acts in relation to the ball.

passive – *grammatical term.* refers to a type of sentence or clause in which the subject receives the action of the verb. For example, "A good time was had by all."

transitive – *gramm.* of a verb: having or taking a direct object

intransitive – *gramm.* of a verb: not taking or having a direct object

actor - *gramm.* person or entity performing the action of a verb

Now it's your turn. In the space below, write an example of sentence that should use the passive.