

Basic uses of the passive

Explanations

■ Agent and instrument

The person who performs an action in a passive sentence is called the agent, introduced by *by*. The agent may or may not be mentioned.

*My purse was found by **one of the cleaners**.*

A new road has been built.

An object which causes something to happen is called an instrument, introduced by *with*.

*He was hit on the head with **a hammer**.*

■ Verbs with two objects

Verbs which have two objects can be made passive in two ways.

*I was handed **a note**. **A note** was handed **to me**.*

Other common verbs of this type are:

bring, give, lend, pass, pay, promise, sell, send, show, tell

■ Verbs with object and complement

Some verbs have a noun or adjective which describes their object.

*We elected Jim **class representative**.*

*Everyone considered him **a failure**.*

When these are made passive, the complement goes directly after the verb.

*Jim was elected **class representative**.*

*He was considered **a failure**.*

■ Verbs which can't be passive

Most verbs with an object (transitive verbs) can be made passive:

e.g. *drive* is transitive because one can drive **something** (a car).

However, a few transitive verbs may not be used in the passive. These include: *become, fit* (be the right size), *get, have, lack, let, like, resemble, suit*.

Verbs with no object (intransitive) can not be passive:

e.g. *fall* is intransitive, you cannot 'fall something'.

Therefore it is not possible to say 'The tree was fallen'. Instead the sentence must be active: *The tree fell*.

■ Change of focus

The passive can change the emphasis of a sentence.

Jack won the prize, (focus on Jack)

The prize was won by Jack, (focus on the prize)

Using and not mentioning the agent

- **Unknown agent**
The agent is not mentioned if unknown.
*My wallet **has been taken**.*
In this case, there is no point in adding an agent: 'by somebody'.
- **Generalised agent**
If the subject is 'people in general' or 'you' the agent is not mentioned.
*Bicycles are widely **used** in the city instead of public transport.*
- **Obvious agent**
If the agent is obvious or has already been referred to, it is not mentioned.
*Linda **has been arrested!** (we assume by the police)*
*The company agreed to our request and a new car park **was opened**.*
- **Unimportant agent**
If the agent is not important to the meaning of the sentence it is not mentioned.
*I **was advised** to obtain a visa in advance.*
- **Impersonality**
Using the passive is a way of avoiding the naming of a specific person who is responsible for an action.
*It **has been decided** to reduce all salaries by 10%.*
In descriptions of processes, there is emphasis on the actions performed rather than on the people who perform them.
*Then the packets **are packed** into boxes of twenty-four.*

Practice

Correct any verb forms which are impossible or inappropriate.

- a) A lot of homes in the area have been being broken into by burglars.
have been broken into
- b) As I drove south, I could see that the old road was rebuilding.
- c) I suppose the letter will have been delivered by now.....
- d) There is nothing more annoying than been interrupted when you are speaking.....
- e) Jim was been given the sack from his new job.....
- f) Somehow without my noticing my wallet had been disappeared.
- g) The new shopping centre was opened by the local MR
- h) A lot of meetings have been held, but nothing has being decided yet.

2 Both sentences in each pair have the same meaning. Complete the second sentence.

- a) The crowd was slowly filling the huge stadium.
The huge stadium *was slowly being filled* by the crowd.
- b) The inventor of the computer simplified the work of the accountants.
Since the computer.....the work of accountants
.....simplified.
- c) Someone has suggested that the shop should close.
It.....that the shop should close.
- d) 'I'd take out some travel insurance if I were you, Mr Smith.'
Mr Smith.....take out some travel insurance.
- e) The waitress will bring your drinks in a moment.
Your drinks.....in a moment.
- f) Someone used a knife to open the window.
This window.....a knife.
- g) You will hear from us when we have finished dealing with your complaint.
After your complaint....., you will hear from us.
- h) An announcement of their engagement appeared in the local paper.
Their engagement.....in the local paper.
- i) Nobody ever heard anything of David again.
Nothing.....David again.
- j) They paid Sheila £1,000 as a special bonus.
£1,000.....Sheila as a special bonus.