

Unit 6 Passive 1

Explanations

Basic uses of
the passive

1 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.

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

He was hit on the head with a hammer.

2 Most verbs with an object (transitive verbs) can be made passive. Common verbs not used in the passive include:

become, fit (be the right size) get, have, lack, let, like, resemble, suit

Some verbs have both transitive and intransitive meanings.

We arrived at the hotel at eight. (cannot be made passive)

How was the answer arrived at? (passive with a different meaning)

3 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*

4 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.

5 Translation

The uses of the passive in English and in other languages are not necessarily the same. Some languages may use passive forms where English uses active ones, and vice versa.

6 Tenses

Although it is possible to form a wide range of passive tenses, the most used are present simple and continuous, past simple and continuous, present perfect simple, past perfect simple, *will* future, and future perfect. There are also present and past passive infinitives.

Using and not mentioning the agent

- 1 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)
- 2 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'
- 3 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.
- 4 Obvious agent
If the agent is obvious or has already been mentioned, 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.

Activities

1

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 MP.
- h) Harry is been questioned by the police about the accident.

2

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

- i) A lot of meetings have been held, but nothing has being decided yet.
- j) Last week it is decided not to have an office party after all.

- a) The crowd was slowly filling the huge stadium.
The huge stadium *was slowly being filled* by the crowd.
- b) The invention of the computer simplified the work of accountants.
Since the computer the work of accountants
- 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 this 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 £1000 as a special bonus.
£1000 Sheila as a special bonus.

3

Rewrite each sentence so that it does not contain the words underlined and so that it contains a passive form.

- a) Someone left the phone off the hook all night.
The phone was left off the hook all night.
- b) The government has announced that petrol prices will rise tomorrow.
.....
- c) A burglar broke into our house last week.
.....
- d) People asked me the way three times.
.....
- e) The fruit-pickers pick the apples early in the morning.
.....
- f) It's time the authorities did something about this problem.
.....
- g) Lots of people had parked their cars on the pavement.
.....
- h) The government agreed with the report and so they changed the law.
.....
- i) You have to fill in an application form.
.....
- j) They don't know what happened to the ship.
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