



ENGLISH GRAMMAR MADE CLEAR

The Passive Voice

When the action matters more than who did it. Every tense, the key structures and plenty of practice, with a full answer key.

The contract **was signed**

It's **being checked**

I **had it fixed**

INSIDE

What is the passive voice?	2
The rules side by side	3
Advanced passive structures	4
Exercises	5–7
Answer key	8

“Sound as capable in English as you are in your own language.”

Melissa B. Duarte · Business English for international professionals · duartebusinessenglish.com

What is the passive voice?

In an **active** sentence, the subject **does** the action. In a **passive** sentence, the subject **receives** the action. We use the passive when the action or the result is more important than who did it, which is why it's everywhere in reports, emails and the news.

ACTIVE

subject **does** it

We focus on the person or thing doing the action.

Our team designed the app.
Someone stole my laptop.

PASSIVE

be + past participle

We focus on the action or on the thing it happened to.

The app was designed by our team.
My laptop was stolen.

THE AGENT

by + doer

Only say who did it when it's important or new information.

The report was written by the CFO.
The office was cleaned. (*by whom? not important*)

Three classic mistakes

- | | |
|---|--|
| ✗ The meeting ~~was cancel~~ . | ✓ The meeting was canceled . |
| ✗ The problem ~~has solved~~ . | ✓ The problem has been solved . |
| ✗ It ~~was happened~~ last week. | ✓ It happened last week. |

Why is it so tricky to master?

- 1 **Every tense has a passive form.** You change *be*, never the main verb: *is made, was made, has been made, will be made, is being made*.
- 2 **You need the past participle**, and many are irregular: *written, built, sent, chosen, paid, known*.
- 3 **Some verbs can't be passive.** Verbs with no object (*happen, arrive, occur, die, seem, rise*) are only active: ~~It was happened~~.
- 4 **Knowing when to use it.** Too many passives sound cold and bureaucratic; too few can sound too personal in formal reports.
- 5 **There are special structures too:** *have something done, It is said that..., He is believed to... and I was given a bonus*.

The rules side by side

Form

be + past participle

- 1 **Present simple: am / is / are + pp**
Emails are sent every morning.
- 2 **Present continuous: am / is / are being + pp**
The office is being painted.
- 3 **Past simple: was / were + pp**
The contract was signed yesterday.
- 4 **Past continuous: was / were being + pp**
The data was being checked when...
- 5 **Present perfect: has / have been + pp**
The invoice has been paid.
- 6 **Past perfect: had been + pp**
The room had been booked.
- 7 **Future & modals: will / can / must / should be + pp**
It will be delivered on Friday.
Forms must be signed.

Use

when do we use it?

- 1 **We don't know who did it**
My car was stolen last night.
- 2 **It's obvious who did it**
He was promoted last year.
- 3 **The result is more important**
Over 2 million units were sold.
- 4 **Formal writing and reports**
The data was collected in May.
- 5 **To be diplomatic / avoid blame**
Mistakes were made. The invoice hasn't been paid.
- 6 **Describing processes**
The beans are roasted, then ground.
- 7 **News and announcements**
A new CEO has been appointed.

Active → passive in 3 steps

1 • Object → subject

The object of the active sentence becomes the subject.

Maria wrote the report. → The report...

2 • Keep the tense in be

Put *be* in the same tense as the active verb.

wrote (past) → was

3 • Add the past participle

Add *by* + agent only if it's useful.

The report was written (by Maria).

Advanced passive structures

These structures are very common in business English, the news and formal writing.

Have / get something done

someone else does it

- 1 **have + object + past participle**
A service someone else does for you.
We had the office redecorated.

- 2 **get + object + past participle**
More informal, same meaning.
I need to get my laptop fixed.

- 3 **Bad experiences**
Something bad happened to you.
She had her bag stolen at the airport.

- 4 **The get passive**
Informal; for changes and accidents.
He got promoted. The files got deleted.

Word order changes the meaning!

- I **had repaired** my car. = I repaired it (past perfect).
- I **had my car repaired**. = a mechanic repaired it for me.

Reporting & two objects

formal passives

- 1 **It + passive + that...**
It is said that the company is in trouble.
It is expected that prices will rise.

- 2 **Subject + passive + to + verb**
The company **is said to be** in trouble.
Prices **are expected to rise**.

- 3 **... to have + pp (about the past)**
He **is believed to have left** the country.

- 4 **Verbs with two objects**
give, send, offer, show, tell, promise, pay
They gave me a bonus. →
I was given a bonus. / A bonus was given to me.

Common reporting verbs

say, believe, think, expect, report, know, consider, estimate, understand

Exercises

1**Active or passive?**

Circle the correct option.

1. The new product last month.
2. The accident at 3 p.m.
3. The emails automatically every morning.
4. The report by the finance team.
5. A lot of mistakes in the first draft.
6. The CEO the merger yesterday.
7. Your order within 48 hours.
8. The office at the moment.
9. The package this morning.
10. This software on any device.

2**Complete the sentences**

Put the verb in brackets into the correct passive form.

1. English _____ (*speak*) in many international companies.
2. The contract _____ (*sign*) last Friday.
3. The new offices _____ (*build*) at the moment.
4. All the invoices _____ (*already / pay*).
5. The results _____ (*announce*) next week.
6. The meeting room must _____ (*book*) in advance.
7. When we arrived, the room _____ (*already / prepare*).
8. Our products _____ (*sell*) in over 40 countries.

Exercises

3

Active to passive

Rewrite the sentences in the passive. Only use *by* if it's important.

- Someone stole my laptop yesterday.
My laptop _____
- The marketing team is preparing the campaign.
The campaign _____
- They have canceled the flight.
The flight _____
- People speak Spanish in more than 20 countries.
Spanish _____
- The manager will send the details tomorrow.
The details _____
- They gave me a bonus.
I _____

4

How our coffee is made

Complete the text with the passive form of the verbs in brackets.

At CaféNova, quality is everything. First, the coffee beans ¹ _____ (*grow*) on small farms in Colombia. They ² _____ (*pick*) by hand and then ³ _____ (*send*) to our factory in Valencia. There, they ⁴ _____ (*roast*) for 15 minutes. Last year, a new roasting machine ⁵ _____ (*install*), so now more coffee ⁶ _____ (*can / produce*) every day. Since 2020, our coffee ⁷ _____ (*sell*) in over 200 shops, and next year it ⁸ _____ (*launch*) in France.

5

Reporting passives

Rewrite each sentence using the word in capitals.

- People say that the CEO is leaving. **SAID**
The CEO _____
- Experts expect that prices will rise. **EXPECTED**
Prices _____
- People believe that the company lost millions. **BELIEVED**
The company _____

Exercises

6

Have something done

Rewrite the sentences using *have* + object + past participle.

1. A mechanic is repairing my car.
I'm having _____
2. Someone cleans our office every evening.
We have _____
3. A designer created our new logo last year.
We had _____
4. An engineer is going to install a new system for us.
We're going to _____

7

Find the mistake

Some sentences are correct. Tick (✓) the correct ones and rewrite the others correctly.

1. The package was arrived yesterday. ☐
2. The new policy will be introduce in May. ☐
3. My flight has been canceled. ☐
4. The windows are clean every week. ☐
5. I had cut my hair yesterday. ☐
6. The company is said to be very profitable. ☐

Answer key

1 Active or passive?

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. was launched | 2. happened |
| 3. are sent | 4. has been written |
| 5. were made | 6. announced |
| 7. will be delivered | 8. is being cleaned |
| 9. arrived | 10. can be used |

2 Complete the sentences

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. is spoken | 2. was signed |
| 3. are being built | 4. have already been paid |
| 5. will be announced | 6. be booked |
| 7. had already been prepared | 8. are sold |

3 Active to passive

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. My laptop was stolen yesterday. | 2. The campaign is being prepared by the marketing team. |
| 3. The flight has been canceled . | 4. Spanish is spoken in more than 20 countries. |
| 5. The details will be sent (by the manager) tomorrow. | 6. I was given a bonus. |

4 How our coffee is made

- | | | | |
|------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 1. are grown | 2. are picked | 3. (are) sent | 4. are roasted |
| 5. was installed | 6. can be produced | 7. has been sold | 8. will be launched |

5 Reporting passives

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. The CEO is said to be leaving . | 2. Prices are expected to rise . |
| 3. The company is believed to have lost millions. | |

6 Have something done

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. I'm having my car repaired . | 2. We have our office cleaned every evening. |
| 3. We had our new logo created / designed last year. | 4. We're going to have a new system installed . |

7 Find the mistake

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. The package arrived yesterday. | 2. The new policy will be introduced in May. |
| 3. ✓ Correct | 4. The windows are cleaned every week. |
| 5. I had my hair cut yesterday. | 6. ✓ Correct |

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