

Passives

Adapted from "First Certificate Language Practice" by Michael Vince

Explanations

Uses

- **Transitive and intransitive verbs**

Only verbs with an object (transitive verbs) can be made passive.

*They sent the letter. The letter **was sent**.*

They arrived late. (cannot be made passive)

Verbs with both direct and indirect objects can be made passive in two ways

*They sent me the letter. I **was sent** the letter.*

*The letter **was sent** to me.*

Some transitive verbs cannot be made passive in some uses. For example *like* and *love*.

*I like this place. (a passive form of this sentence is **not possible**)*

- Focus on important information

By placing the object at the beginning of the sentence, the passive can change the focus of interest in a sentence.

***United were beaten by Arsenal.** (we are more interested in United)*

The passive is used **in** a variety of contexts. Notice how the agent (person who does the action) is unimportant, unknown or clear from the situation,

Impersonal statements *Students **are asked** not to smoke.*

When the agent is unknown

*My bike **has been stolen!** (Here we could say *Someone/They have stolen my bike.*) when the agent is obvious.*

*Mr Jones **will be arrested.***

How something was **done** *The box **was opened with a knife.***

Reporting verbs

- The passive is often used with *say, believe, understand, know* and similar verbs used in reporting speech to avoid an impersonal *they* or *people*.

People say that John Wilson lives in New York.

*John Wilson **is said to live in New York.***

- Other verb forms can also be reported in this way.

They say John Wilson is travelling in Africa.
John Wilson is said to be travelling in Africa.
People say John Wilson has arrived in Australia.
John Wilson is said to have arrived in Australia.

Have/Get something done

- When someone does some work for us, we can use *have something done*.
Last year I had new tiles put on the roof.
I'm having my hair cut this afternoon.
- The same construction can describe bad luck caused by an unspecified person.
Peter had his car stolen last week.
And then he had his leg broken playing football.
- Using *get* instead of *have* in the examples in paragraph 1 above would be more informal.
Using *get* can also suggest managing to do something difficult.
It was difficult but we got the painting done in the end.

Needs doing

This is an idiomatic way of expressing a passive sentence where a thing or person needs some kind of action.

The floor is filthy. It needs to be cleaned.
The floor is filthy. It needs cleaning.

Verbs and prepositions

The preposition stays with the verb in a passive sentence.

People shouted at the Prime Minister during his speech.
The Prime Minister was shouted at during his speech.

Other problems

- *Be born* is a passive form but does not have an obvious passive meaning.
I was born near Kyoto.
- *Make* (when meaning *force*) is followed by *to* in the passive.
They made David work hard. David was made to work hard.
- Because the agent is unimportant, unknown or obvious, it is often not included. If we want to say who does the action we use *by*.
This letter was delivered this morning.
This letter was delivered this morning by courier.

Key points

- 1 Not all verbs can be made passive. You can check in a dictionary whether the verb is transitive or intransitive.
- 2 The agent is only included if this information is needed.
- 3 Passive forms are often used to give an impersonal view.

- 4 When we change from passive to active the meaning changes slightly. In particular, the focus of interest changes. A passive form may be more suitable in some contexts but unsuitable in others.
- 5 Passive forms tend to be used more often in writing, especially in scientific and technical language.