

UNIT
29

Forming passive sentences

A

Passive verb forms have one of the tenses of the verb **to be** and a **past participle**. Passive verb forms are summarised in Appendix 1.

Verbs which take an object (*transitive verbs*) can have a passive form. So we can make corresponding passive sentences for:

- They **destroyed** *the building*. ↔ The building **was destroyed**.
- The news **surprised** *me*. ↔ I **was surprised** by the news.

Verbs which *do not* take an object (*intransitive verbs*) do not have passive forms. For example, there are no passive forms for the following sentences:

- I **slept** for nearly ten hours last night.
- The ship slowly **disappeared** from view.

A good dictionary will tell you whether verbs are transitive or intransitive.

However, many verbs can be used at different times with and without objects – that is, they can be both transitive and intransitive. Compare:

- Are they **meeting** *him* at the station? (*transitive*) Is he **being met** at the airport? (*passive*)
- When shall we **meet**? (*intransitive*; no passive possible)

B

Verbs that can be followed by either **object + object** or **object + prepositional object** in active clauses (see Unit 42) can have two corresponding passive forms. The passive form you choose depends on which is more appropriate in a particular context. Compare:

<i>active</i>	<i>passive</i>
• She handed me the plate . ✓	• I was handed the plate. ✓
• She handed the plate to me . ✓	• The plate was handed to me. ✓

Other verbs like this include **give, lend, offer, promise, sell, teach, tell, throw**. However, verbs that can't be followed by **object + object** in the active have only one of these passive forms:

• He described me the situation . ✗	• I was described the situation. ✗
• He described the situation to me . ✓	• The situation was described to me. ✓

- Other verbs like this include **demonstrate, explain, introduce, mention, report, suggest**.

C

We can make a passive form of transitive two- and three-word verbs (see Unit 114). Compare:

- Martha **talked me into** buying a motorbike. (= V + object + preposition) *and*
- I **was talked into** buying a motorbike by Martha.
- They **gave over the whole programme to** a report from Bosnia. (= V + adverb + object + preposition) *and*
- *The whole programme was given over to* a report from Bosnia.

Some transitive two- and three-word verbs are rarely used in the passive:

- We **got the money back** for her, but it took ages. (*rather than* The money was got back...)
- I had to **put out a hand** to steady myself. (*rather than* A hand was put out...)

Other verbs like this include **get down** (= write what somebody says), **let in** (= when something has a hole in it that allows water, light, etc. to get into it), **let out** (e.g. a scream), **show off** (= encourage people to see something because you are proud of it), **take after** (= resemble).

EXERCISES

29.1 First, look in your dictionary to find out whether these verbs are transitive or intransitive.

arrive destroy deteriorate develop follow exist
happen need prevent recede release wear

Then complete these sentences with appropriate passive (if possible) or active forms of the verbs.
(A)

- 1 A number of priceless works of art in the earthquake.
- 2 By the time Carol we had finished eating and were ready to go.
- 3 No record of the visit he claimed to have made to Paris in 1941.
- 4 Because my visa had expired I from re-entering the country.
- 5 It is generally agreed that new industries for the southern part of the country.
- 6 If Nick hadn't come along, I don't know what would
- 7 The economic situation in the region quite sharply over the last year.
- 8 The coastline into the distance as our ship sailed further away.
- 9 It's incredible to think that these clothes by Queen Victoria.
- 10 A new drug to combat asthma in small children.
- 11 When Kathy left the room, everyone
- 12 A number of political prisoners within the next few days.

29.2 Make one corresponding passive sentence or two, if possible, as in 1. (B)

- 1 Someone threw a lifebelt to me.
I was thrown a lifebelt. / A lifebelt was thrown to me.
- 2 Someone mentioned the problem to me.
- 3 Someone had reported the theft to the police.
- 4 Someone told the story to me.
- 5 Someone has given £1,000 to the charity.
- 6 Someone will demonstrate the game to the children.
- 7 Someone was offering drinks to the guests.
- 8 Someone explained the procedure to me.
- 9 Someone sold the car to Tom.



29.3 If possible, make a corresponding passive sentence as in 1. If it is not possible, write 'No passive'. (C)

- 1 The committee called on Paula to explain her reasons for the proposed changes.
Paula was called on to explain her reasons for the proposed changes (by the committee).
- 2 I got down most of what he said in his lecture. Most of what he said in his lecture...
- 3 When I was young my aunt and uncle looked after me. When I was young I...
- 4 The surgeons operated on him for nearly 12 hours. He...
- 5 Sandra let out a scream and she collapsed to the floor. A scream...
- 6 Hugh takes after Edward – they're both very well organised. Edward...
- 7 All his relatives approved of his decision. His decision...

UNIT
30

Using passives

A The choice between an active and passive sentence allows us to present the same information in two different orders. Compare:

active • The storm damaged the roof.

This sentence is about *the storm*, and says what it did. (*The storm* is the 'agent'.)

passive • The roof was damaged by the storm.

This sentence is about *the roof*, and says what happened to it. (The 'agent' goes in a prepositional phrase with *by* after the verb.)

B Here are some situations where we typically choose a passive rather than an active.

- When the agent is not known, is 'people in general', is unimportant, or is obvious, we prefer passives. In an active sentence we need to include the agent as subject; using a passive allows us to omit the agent by leaving out the prepositional phrase with *by*:
 - ! • My office **was broken into** when I was on holiday. (unknown agent)
 - An order form **can be found** on page 2. (agent = people in general)
 - These boxes **should be handled** with care. (unimportant agent)
 - She **is being treated** in hospital. (obvious agent; presumably 'doctors')
- In factual writing, particularly in describing procedures or processes, we often wish to omit the agent, and use passives:
 - Nuclear waste will still be radioactive even after 20,000 years, so it **must be disposed of** very carefully. It **can be stored** as a liquid in stainless-steel containers which **are encased in** concrete. The most dangerous nuclear waste **can be turned** into glass. It **is planned** to store this glass in deep underground mines.
- In spoken English we often use a subject such as **people, somebody, they, we, or you** even when we do not know who the agent is. In formal English, particularly writing, we often prefer to use a passive. Compare:
 - **They're installing** the new computer system next month.
 - The new computer system **is being installed** next month. (more formal)

Notice also that some verbs have corresponding nouns. These nouns can be used as the subject of passive sentences, with a new passive verb introduced:

 - The **installation** of the new computer system **will be completed** by next month.
- In English we usually prefer to put old information at the beginning of a sentence (or clause) and new information at the end. Choosing the passive often allows us to do this. Compare these two texts and notice where the old information (in *italics*) and new information (in **bold**) is placed in the second sentence of each. The second text uses a passive:
 - The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. **The Boron Group in Germany** manufactured *the machines*.
 - The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. *The machines* were manufactured **by the Boron Group in Germany**.
- It is often more natural to put agents (subjects) which consist of long expressions at the end of a sentence. Using the passive allows us to do this. So, for example:
 - **I was surprised** by *Don's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney*.

is more natural than '*Don's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney* surprised me.'

EXERCISES

30.1 Rewrite these sentences. Instead of using 'people', 'somebody', or 'they', write a passive sentence with an appropriate verb form. (A & B)

- 1 Somebody introduced me to Dr Felix last year. I was introduced to Dr Felix last year.
- 2 People are destroying large areas of forest every day.
- 3 Somebody has bought the land next to our house.
- 4 Somebody had already reported the accident before I phoned.
- 5 I hope they will have completed all the marking by tomorrow.
- 6 People were using the tennis court, so we couldn't play.
- 7 Somebody will tell you when you should go in to see the doctor.
- 8 They should have finished the hotel by the time you arrive.
- 9 No doubt somebody will blame me for the problem.
- 10 People expect better results soon.
- 11 They have found an unexploded bomb in Herbert Square, and they are evacuating the area.

30.2 Here is the beginning of a report of an experiment. Rewrite it, putting verbs in the passive where appropriate and making any other necessary changes. (B)

- I conducted the test in the school library to minimise noise.
- I took the children out of their normal lessons and I tested them in groups of four. I carried out all the tests in January 1996. The test consisted of two components. First, I showed the children a design (I presented these in Chapter 3) and I asked them to describe what they saw. I tape recorded all their answers. I then gave them a set of anagrams (words with jumbled letters) which I instructed them to solve in as short a time as possible. I remained in the room while the children did this...

The test ...

30.3 Rewrite these sentences beginning with (The) + a noun formed from the underlined verb and a passive verb. Choose an appropriate verb tense and make any other necessary changes. (B)

- 1 They will consider the issue at next week's meeting. Consideration will be given to the issue at next week's meeting.
- 2 They eventually permitted the site to be used for the festival.
- 3 They have transferred the money to my bank account.
- 4 They will present the trophy after the speeches.
- 5 They will not announce the findings until next week.
- 6 They demolished the building in only two days.
- 7 They will produce the new car in a purpose-built factory.