

UNIT 6

The Passive



Stonehenge **was built** in prehistoric times.
It **was probably constructed** as a place of worship.
Many of its stones **have been stolen** over the years.
It **is visited** by a lot of tourists every year.

We form the passive with the verb **to be** and the **past participle** of the main verb.

to be + past participle (pp)

◆ The passive forms are:

present simple: **am/is/are + pp**
My car **is serviced** twice a year.

present continuous: **am/is/are being + pp**
My car **is being serviced** now.

past simple: **was/were + pp**
My car **was serviced** last month.

past continuous: **was/were being + pp**
My car **was being serviced** when I went to the garage.

present perfect simple: **have/has been + pp**
My car **has already been serviced**.

past perfect simple: **had been + pp**
My car **had been serviced** by two o'clock.

future simple: **will be + pp**
My car **will be serviced** tomorrow.

future perfect simple: **will have been + pp**
My car **will have been serviced** by Monday.

present infinitive: **(to) be + pp**
My car **needs to be serviced** soon.

perfect infinitive: **(to) have been + pp**
My car **should have been serviced** last month.

-ing form: **being + pp**
I **insist on my car being serviced** today.

modals: **modal + be + pp**
My car **must be serviced** before the trip.

- ◆ The present perfect continuous, the future continuous, the past perfect continuous and the future perfect continuous are not normally used in the passive.
- ◆ We can use the verb **to get** instead of the verb **to be** in everyday speech when we talk about things that happen by accident or unexpectedly.
e.g. *Mary **got run over** by a car while she was crossing the street. (=Mary was run over...)*

Use

The passive is used:

- a) when the person who carries out the action is unknown, unimportant or obvious from the context.



*Mrs Archer's ruby ring **was stolen** from her house last night. (We do not know who stole the ring.)*



*Rolls Royce cars **are made** in England. (It is not important to know who makes the cars.)*



*The cows **are milked** once a day. (It is obvious that the farmer milks the cows.)*

- b) when the action itself is more important than the person who carries it out, as in news headlines, newspaper articles, formal notices, instructions, advertisements, etc.



*Two teenagers **were seriously injured** in a car accident last night.*

- c) when we want to make statements more polite.
e.g. *My new blouse **is ruined**. (more polite than saying, 'You've ruined my new blouse.')*

Note: The passive is used more often in written English than in spoken English.

Changing from active into passive

To change a sentence from the active into the passive:

- The **object** of the active sentence becomes the **subject** in the passive sentence.
- The active verb remains in the same tense, but changes into a passive form.
- The subject of the active sentence becomes the **agent**, and is either introduced with the preposition **by** or omitted.

◆ Only transitive verbs (verbs followed by an object) can be changed into the passive.

e.g. active: *Peter feeds the cows.* (transitive verb) passive: *The cows are fed by Peter.*

but: *They leave for work early every day.* (The verb *leave* in this sentence is intransitive; that is, it is not followed by an object. The sentence cannot be changed into the passive.)

	subject	verb	object		subject	verb	agent
active	Sharon	wrote	a report.	passive	A report	was written	by Sharon.

Study the table:

	active	passive
present simple	She writes the reports.	The reports are written .
present continuous	She is writing the reports.	The reports are being written .
past simple	She wrote the reports.	The reports were written .
past continuous	She was writing the reports.	The reports were being written .
present perfect simple	She has written the reports.	The reports have been written .
past perfect simple	She had written the reports.	The reports had been written .
future simple	She will write the reports.	The reports will be written .
future perfect simple	She will have written the reports.	The reports will have been written .
infinitive	She has to write the reports.	The reports have to be written .
modals (modal + be + pp)	She may write the reports.	The reports may be written .

- ◆ We use **by + agent** to say who or what carries out the action. We use **with + instrument/material/ ingredient** to say what the agent used.
e.g. *A kite was made **by John**. It was made **with paper, paint and string**.*
- ◆ The agent is often omitted in the passive sentence when the subject of the active sentence is one of the following words: **people, one, someone/somebody, they, he**, etc.
e.g. active: ***People** eat a lot of junk food nowadays.* passive: *A lot of junk food is eaten nowadays.*
- ◆ **Object pronouns** (me, you, him, etc.) become **subject pronouns** (I, you, he, etc.) in the passive.
e.g. active: *They rescued **me**.* passive: ***I** was rescued.*
- ◆ With verbs which take two objects such as **bring, tell, send, show, teach, promise, buy, throw, write, award, hand, sell, owe, grant, allow, feed, pass, post, read, take, offer, give, pay** and **lend**, we can make two different passive sentences. However, it is more usual for passive sentences to begin with the person.

active: *Jessica showed Rod some photos.*

passive: a) *Rod was shown some photos by Jessica.* (more usual)

b) *Some photos were shown to Rod by Jessica.*