

Active and passive voice

Meaning and use

In English, we can express sentences in two different ways: active voice and passive voice.

The active voice is used when the focus is on the subject (or agent) of the main verb. This is the person or thing doing the verb.

- Millions of people use the internet every day.
- A strong storm destroyed many houses in the village.
- Only six students passed the test.

The passive voice is used when the person or the thing affected by the main verb becomes the focus.

- The internet is used by millions of people every day.
- Many houses in the village were destroyed by a strong storm.
- The test was passed by only six students.

The passive is often used when the person or thing doing the verb is not important, unknown, or obvious. In this case, we may leave them out completely.

- The solution was heated to 100 degrees. (agent is unimportant)
- My bike was stolen last Thursday. (identity of agent is unknown)
- The president was voted into office. (agent is obvious)

Form

The active voice is made with subject + main verb + object.

- Bees make honey.
- James Cameron directed Titanic.
- Alex is repairing Bill's bicycle.

The passive voice is made with subject + to be + past participle + by + object.

Note that the active voice object becomes the passive voice subject. In the passive, the main verb is always the past participle.

Positive

- Honey is made by bees.
- Titanic was directed by James Cameron.
- Bill's bicycle is being repaired by Alex.

Negative

We make the negative passive with subject + negative of to be + past participle + by + object.

- Honey is not made by wasps.
- Titanic wasn't directed by George Lucas.
- Bill's bicycle is not being repaired by Alex.

Question

- Is honey made by bees?
- Was Titanic directed by James Cameron?
- Is Bill's bicycle being repaired by Alex?

Take note: describing a process

We can use the passive voice to describe processes in which the action is more important than the person performing it.

- The metal sheeting was heated and bent into shape before being cooled, polished, and finally painted.

Spoken English

When using the passive voice, get is sometimes used in place of the verb to be. This is especially common in informal, spoken English.

- I got fired for being late!
- These letters get delivered first.
- Your bike will get stolen if you don't lock it up.

Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/course/intermediate/unit-12/tab/grammar>