

## Section 6 passives

### active and passive verbs

In many situations there are two participants: one that does something, or has an effect (the 'agent') and another that something happens to, or that is affected (the 'patient'). English, like many languages, has different sets of verb forms for these situations.

- If we want to focus on the **agent**, we make the agent the **subject** and use **active** verbs.  
*Harry invited everybody. The volcano destroyed six villages.*
- If we want to focus on the **patient**, we make the patient the **subject** and use **passive** verbs. The agent is backgrounded or not mentioned.  
*Everybody was invited (by Harry). Six villages were destroyed (by the volcano).*

## revise the basics

**passive tenses** We make **passive verbs** with forms of **be + past participle** (*made, stolen* etc). **Passive verbs** have the **same tenses** (simple present, present progressive, present perfect etc) as active verbs (see page 297 for a list).

*These cars are made in Japan. Your room is being cleaned now.*

*Nobody has been told about the problems. The contract will be signed next week.*

### 1 CHECK YOUR KNOWLEDGE. Correct the mistakes or write 'Correct'.

- ▶ Has my suit cleaned yet? *been cleaned*..... ▶ Nobody was asked. *Correct*.....
- 1 Tomorrow's meeting has been cancelled. ....
- 2 You will told where to go. ....
- 3 We were taught to be polite to older people. ....
- 4 The road was closed because it was being repaired. ....
- 5 I'm afraid you have not selected for interview. ....
- 6 I heard that my friends had being arrested. ....

**passive infinitives and -ing forms (to) be + past participle; being + past participle.**

*I want to be paid now. We expect to be informed of your results.*

*He loves being photographed. I got in without being seen.*

**Modal verbs** are often followed by passive infinitives.

*Something must be done. I'm afraid the date can't be changed.*

### 2 CHECK YOUR KNOWLEDGE. Correct the mistakes or write 'Correct'.

- ▶ She dislikes being touching. *touching*..... ▶ Everybody must be told. *Correct*.....
- 1 I really think the whole family must to be consulted. ....
- 2 John hates being rushed. ....
- 3 I didn't expect been stopped. ....
- 4 Do you enjoy being message? ....
- 5 I hope to be promoted soon. ....
- 6 Alice should be told immediately. ....

**use of by** We use *by* ... in passive structures if we need to say who or what did something; but most often this is unnecessary. (Only about 20% of passives have *by*-phrases.)

*Who was this picture painted by? It was painted by Rembrandt.*

*Your room has been cleaned by the cleaner. These cars are made in Japan.*



**verb + preposition** In passive structures, verb + preposition groups stay together.

*The plan was thought about very carefully. (NOT About the plan was thought ...)*  
*I don't like being shouted at.*

### 3 CHECK YOUR KNOWLEDGE Correct the mistakes or write 'Correct':

- 1 For everything will be paid at the end of the month. ....
- 2 Emma's novel has been translated into German by a translator. ....
- 3 I hate being spoken as if I was a servant. ....
- 4 My mother was very well looked after in hospital. ....
- 5 I'm afraid John can't be relied on to keep his promises. ....
- 6 By who was the new cathedral built? .....

**Verbs with two objects** like *give* or *send* have two possible active and passive structures.

ACTIVE

*They gave/sent Joe a gold watch.*

*Joe was given/sent a gold watch.*

*They gave/sent a gold watch to Joe.*

*A gold watch was given/sent to Joe.*

We choose the structure which fits best with what comes before and after (see page 80).

The structure with the **person** as subject (e.g. *Joe was given ...*) is very common.

### 4 Correct (✓) or not (X)? (One sentence is wrong.)

- 1 Peter was given a new car when he passed his exam. ...
- 2 The builders are being given another month to finish the work. ...
- 3 You were lent a bicycle last week – where is it? ...
- 4 To my mother has just been sent a wonderful bouquet of flowers. ...
- 5 I think Sally will be given the manager's job. ...
- 6 Harold was awarded a medal for long service. ...

**get-passives** We often make passives with **get** instead of **be**, especially in spoken English.

*My suitcase got stolen at the airport. We never get invited to her parties.*

The **get-passive** often suggests that things happen by accident, unexpectedly, or outside our control. It is not often used for longer, more deliberate, planned actions. Compare:

*My sister got bitten by a dog yesterday.*

*Don't worry about the repairs; they'll get done sooner or later.*

*The Emperor Charlemagne was crowned in 800 AD. (It would be strange to say 'Charlemagne got crowned ...')*

*The new school will be opened by the Prime Minister on May 25th.*

The **get-passive** is **often** (not always) used to talk about **bad** things that happen; perhaps because unexpected or unplanned events are mostly unwelcome.

### 5 Five of the passive verbs in sentences 1–8 would also be natural with **get**. Change them.

- ▶ Maggie was hit by a car this morning. ... *Maggie got hit* .....
  - ▶ Mount Everest was first climbed in 1953. ... *Not natural with get* .....
- 1 We were burgled last night. ....
  - 2 Our roof was damaged in the storm. ....
  - 3 St Paul's Cathedral was built by Sir Christopher Wren. ....
  - 4 If you are caught, don't tell the police anything. ....
  - 5 If there is one mosquito in the house, I am always bitten. ....
  - 6 Dr Lee was awarded the Nobel prize for physics last year. ....
  - 7 We were all sent home early because of the strike. ....
  - 8 These cars are manufactured by a Japanese firm. ....



## reasons for using passives

There are several different reasons for using passives. This text illustrates some of them.

### 1 A DRIVER has been sent to jail for 90 days for speeding.

**G**RAHAM SMITH, 29, of North Street, Barton, was driving at over 60mph (96kph) near a Barton primary school last November when he was stopped by police officers, Didcot magistrates heard on Thursday. Twelve months earlier Smith had been disqualified from driving for three years for driving at 70mph in

the Barton town centre. He was banned for twelve months in 2004 for a similar offence.

Mr Peter Jones, defending, said Smith had been using the car to visit a sick friend. He said Smith was depressed after the visit, and was anxious to get home as soon as possible.

He was caught by police during a routine speed check in Wantage Road, Barton. ■

**1 DO IT YOURSELF:** Look at the way these passive verbs are used in the text: *has been sent; was stopped; had been disqualified; was banned; was caught*. Then look at the following explanations for why the writer chose passives. Two of them are right – which? The other three are wrong.

- A The writer was most interested in what happened, not who it happened to.
- B Most of the text is about what was done to somebody, not what he/she/it did.
- C It is not known, not important or obvious who did something.
- D The writer was giving details of past events.
- E The writer wanted to go on talking about Smith. Active verbs (*magistrates have sent ... , police stopped ...* etc) would mean changing the subject and taking the focus away from Smith.

**Explanations ... and ... are right.**

**same subject** A passive verb can make it possible to go on talking about the same person or thing (see explanation E, above).

*He waited for two hours; then he was seen by a doctor; then he was sent back to the waiting room. He sat there for another two hours – by this time he was getting angry. Then he was taken upstairs ...*

### 2 Choose the best ways of continuing each sentence.

- 1 He lives in a small house.  
A Somebody built it about forty years ago. B It was built about forty years ago.
- 2 English is well worth learning.  
A People use it for international communication. B It is used for international communication.
- 3 He got a sports car, but he didn't like it.  
A So he sold it again. B So it was sold again.
- 4 My nephew is an artist.  
A He has just painted another picture. B Another picture has just been painted by him.
- 5 The new Virginia Meyer film is marvellous.  
A They are showing it at our local cinema. B It is being shown at our local cinema.
- 6 'How are your brothers?'  
A 'Fine. Peter's restoring an old boat.' B 'Fine. An old boat is being restored by Peter.'



**another reason: heavy subjects** We don't like to begin sentences with long and heavy subjects. One way of avoiding this is to use passive structures. Compare:

*John trying to tell everybody what he thought annoyed me.*

*I was annoyed by John trying to tell everybody what he thought.*

*That she had not written to her parents for over two years surprised me.*

*I was surprised that she had not written to her parents for over two years.*

### 3 Change these sentences. Can you see how this makes them better?

1 George ringing me up me up at three o'clock in the morning to tell me he was in love again didn't please me.

2 Caroline telling me that she had always wanted to be a singer surprised me.

3 That nobody was prepared to take him to hospital shocked us.

4 That Mary thought she was better than everybody else irritated everybody.

**formality and style** Passives are very common in some kinds of formal writing where the writer keeps him/herself in the background – for example business or scientific reports.

*The Department has been reorganised over the last year.* (RATHER THAN *We have reorganised the Department ...*)

*Three different compounds were investigated for their resistance to oxidation.* (RATHER THAN *I investigated three ...*)

Passives are also used to make rules and instructions seem less personally directed.

*Bicycles may not be parked against these railings.* (RATHER THAN *You may not park bicycles ...*)

For some more complex formal passive structures, see pages 82–83.

### 4 Rewrite these sentences using passive verbs.

1 You must send applications to the Central Office before August 1. You must attach all supporting documentation, and you must enclose a cheque in payment of the full fee. You must also enclose a stamped addressed envelope.

2 We selected fifty workers at random and gave them a thorough physical examination. We took blood samples from all fifty and analysed them. We found no traces of lead poisoning.

**indefinite agents** Passives are often used in a formal style where the person or thing that does an action is unknown or indefinite. In a less formal style, we often prefer an active verb with a general pronoun like *they* or *you*. Compare:

*Road repairs are being carried out.* *They're digging up the damned road again.*

*The police are never successfully sued.* *You can't win a case against the police.*



## complex passive structures

Note these passive structures. They are mostly rather formal.

### A Passive of verbs followed by *that*-clauses

*They know that he is abroad.* → *It is known that he is abroad.* / *He is known to be abroad.*

Many verbs that are followed by *that*-clauses (e.g. *think, believe, say*) can be used in passive structures with introductory *it*. They are mostly rather formal, but common in news reports.

*It is thought that the Minister will resign.*

*At that time, it was believed that the sky was a crystal sphere.*

*It is expected that the company will become profitable in the New Year.*

*It was said that the gods were angry.*

Another way of expressing the same ideas is with **subject + passive verb + infinitive**.

*He is known to be in Wales.*    *They are said to own several houses.*

*She is understood to have left home.* (Note the perfect infinitive.)

This structure is also possible with **there** as a subject.

*There are thought to be fewer than twenty people still living in the village.*

*There were said to be ghosts in the house, but I never heard anything.*

### 1 Make the sentences passive.

- ▶ People think the government will fall. (*It*) ... *It is believed that the government will fall.* .....
- ▶ Everybody knows he is violent. (*He*) ... *He is known to be violent.* .....
- ▶ They say there is bad weather on the way (*There*) ... *There is said to be bad weather on the way.* .....
- 1 They believed that fresh air was bad for sick people. (*It*) .....
- 2 Some people claim that there are wolves in the mountains. (*There*) .....
- 3 They think that the man holding the hostages is heavily armed. (*The man*) .....
- 4 They say he is in an agitated state. (*He*) .....
- 5 People suggest that the rate of inflation will rise. (*It*) .....
- 6 They report that she died in a plane crash. (*She - perfect infinitive*) .....
- 7 People believe that there are 6,000 different languages in the world. (*There*) .....
- 8 We understand that she left the country on Friday. (*It*) .....
- 9 They think that there is oil under Windsor Castle. (*There*) .....
- 10 People believed that the earth was the centre of the universe. (*The earth*) .....
- 11 They know that he has been married four times. (*He*) .....
- 12 We expect that there will be an announcement on Friday. (*It*) .....

## B Passive of verbs followed by object + infinitive

They asked me to give my name. → I was asked to give my name.

Many verbs that are followed by object + infinitive (e.g. ask, tell, expect, choose) can be used in passive structures with infinitives.

I was asked to give my name and date of birth. We were told to take the 9.15 train.  
You are not expected to work on Sundays. Ann was chosen to represent our street.

Note that see, hear and make are followed by to-infinitives in this structure.

He was seen to come out of her house at two o'clock.

She has never been heard to say a kind word. We were made to lie on the floor.

Verbs that refer to wanting and liking are not generally used in this passive structure.

(NOT I was wanted to reply: OR Everybody is liked to make suggestions.)

## 2 Write true or false continuations for these sentences.

- 1 I have never been asked to .....
- 2 I have often been told to .....
- 3 I am not usually expected to .....
- 4 I will never be chosen to .....
- 5 I have never been seen to .....
- 6 I have sometimes been heard to .....
- 7 I would not like to be made to .....

## C Passive of verbs with object + noun/adjective complement

They considered him a genius. → He was considered a genius.

Many verbs that are followed by object + noun/adjective complement (e.g. consider, elect, make, call, regard ... as, see ... as) can be used in passive structures.

He was considered a genius by many people. Mrs Robins was elected President.  
We were made very happy by the decision. He was generally regarded as stupid.

## 3 Make the sentences passive.

- 1 They appointed Mr Evans secretary.  
.....
- 2 We considered Louise a sort of clown.  
.....
- 3 People regarded Dr Hastings as an expert on criminal law.  
.....
- 4 The new owners have made the house much more attractive.  
.....
- 5 The villagers called her a witch.  
.....
- 6 They elected Professor Martin Vice-President.  
.....

## NOTES

A few verbs that are followed by infinitives (most commonly decide, agree) can be used in passive structures beginning with it.

It was decided not to advertise again. It was agreed to hold a meeting in April.

But most verbs cannot be used in this way.

(NOT It is started to make a profit: OR It is not expected to have difficulty.)

For the passive structures that are possible with a particular verb, see a good dictionary.