

The passive

Uses of the passive

We use the passive (verb) to focus on what happens to the subject as the person or thing that experiences the action. The subject of the passive is usually the main topic of the sentence (1), often a pronoun referring back to something in a previous sentence (2).

1. One of the mysteries of science is an electrically neutral particle called a neutrino. *The existence of neutrinos* **was predicted** twenty years before *the first one* **was** actually **discovered** in a laboratory.
2. *They* **are produced** by a nuclear reaction in the sun. *They* **are believed** to pass through solid objects, such as our bodies, without having any effect.

We often use 'reporting' (3) and 'thinking' (4) verbs in the passive, plus an infinitive, when we want to avoid presenting information as established fact.

3. The two former rivals **are rumoured to be** in secret negotiations. (~~rumoured in negotiations~~)
4. Businesses don't want to conduct interviews. They **are thought to be** too time-consuming.

• **Other verbs used in this way:** allege, believe, claim, consider, feel, imagine, report, say

The passive with by-phrases

The agent is the person or thing that does or causes the action. In active sentences, the agent is the subject (5). In passive sentences, we don't usually mention the agent. We include the agent in a *by*-phrase after the verb when the meaning is not complete without it, or when all the key information cannot be conveyed without it (6).

5. *Shakespeare* wrote Hamlet. *Many famous actors* have played the title role.
6. Hamlet **was written by Shakespeare**. The title role **has been played by many famous actors**.

We don't usually include pronouns (7) or predictable general agents (8) in a *by*-phrase.

7. We completed the final report on time. → The final report **was completed** on time (by us).
8. Workers must always wear safety helmets on the work site. → Safety helmets **must** always **be worn** on the work site (by workers).

The passive with get

We can use *get* + past participle (9) instead of *be* + past participle (10) as a passive, usually in informal contexts, as another way to talk about the subject experiencing the action.

9. I'll **get paid** on Friday.
My books **got damaged** when the basement **got flooded** last year.
10. I'll **be paid** on Friday.
My books **were damaged** when the basement **was flooded** last year.

We can also use *get* + object + past participle to say that the subject causes the action (13). We use a reflexive pronoun when the object is the same as the subject (14).

11. I have **to get a special photo taken** before I can **get my passport renewed**.
12. Some of the demonstrators came to the protest determined to **get themselves arrested**.

The passive with have

We can use *have* + object + past participle as a passive in two ways. We can say that the subject experiences the action (13) or the subject causes (or arranges for) the action to be performed (14).

13. My neighbour has such bad luck.
Yesterday she **had her purse stolen** in the supermarket.
14. If you fill out a form at the post office, you can **have your mail forwarded** to your new flat.

We can also use *have* + **object** + the base form of the verb (15) or + a present participle (16) to say that the subject causes (or arranges for) the action.

15. The clinic **has all new patients complete** a questionnaire about their medical history.
16. His story was so sad it almost **had us crying**.
We'll soon **have you up and running** again.