The Passive Voice

The active says who does something; the passive puts the thing done to first. Use it when the action matters more than the person.

A2–C1 · Philo & Sophia, Lesson 20

"Nobody broke it." · "It was broken."

ACTIVE

The farmer (SUBJECT (DOER)) | milks (VERB) | the cows (OBJECT) | every morning. (TIME)

PASSIVE

The cows (SUBJECT) | are milked (BE + PAST PARTICIPLE) | every morning (TIME) | (by the farmer). (BY + DOER)

1 The object becomes the subject.
2 Add **be** in the same tense as the active verb.
3 Add the **past participle**.
4 Add **by + doer** only if it matters.

The passive in every tense

be + past participle

TENSE	FORM	EXAMPLE
present simple	am / is / are + p.p.	The cows **are milked** every morning.
present continuous	am / is / are being + p.p.	The barn **is being painted** this week.
past simple	was / were + p.p.	The bread **was baked** yesterday.
past continuous	was / were being + p.p.	The hay **was being cut** when it rained.
present perfect	has / have been + p.p.	The fence **has been mended**.
past perfect	had been + p.p.	The field **had been ploughed** before the storm.
future (will)	will be + p.p.	The eggs **will be collected** tomorrow.
going to	am / is / are going to be + p.p.	The calves **are going to be sold**.
future perfect	will have been + p.p.	The wheat **will have been harvested** by May.
modal	can / must / should be + p.p.	The gate **must be closed** at night.
modal perfect	should have been + p.p.	The hens **should have been locked** in.

Only be changes with the tense; the past participle never changes

When to use it

why the passive?

The doer is unknown: *My bike was stolen.*

The doer is obvious: *He was arrested.* (by the police)

The doer doesn't matter: *Cheese is made from milk.*

Formal, scientific and news writing: *The samples were tested.*

In everyday speech the active is more common

by or with?

adding the doer

by + the person or thing that does it: *The castle was built **by** the Moors.*

with + a tool or material: *The fence was mended **with** wire.*

Add *by…* only when it is new or important information: *Don Quixote was written **by** Cervantes.*

Not "by someone" or "by people": just leave it out

Two objects

give, send, tell, show

Active: *They gave **Sophia** a prize.*

Passive 1 (more common): ***Sophia was given** a prize.*

Passive 2: ***A prize was given** to Sophia.*

Also: *I was told…, we were shown…, he was sent…*

English can make the person the subject; Spanish cannot

It is said that…

formal reporting

It is said that the castle is haunted.

The castle **is said to be** haunted.

He **is thought to have** left early. (past)

Also: *believed, known, reported, expected, considered.*

Useful for careful, neutral writing about uncertain facts

Not every verb can be passive

- Verbs with no object can't be passive: *The accident **happened***, not ~~was happened~~; *He **died***, not ~~was died~~. Also: *arrive, come, go, sleep, seem.*
- Informal **get**-passive: *My bike **got stolen**. They **got married***. See also the causative: *I **had** my hair **cut*** (someone did it for me).

Spanish speakers, watch out

- *Se habla inglés* = English **is spoken**.
- *Se venden huevos* = Eggs **are sold** (here).
- *Me robaron la bici* = My bike **was stolen**.
- *Le dieron un premio* = **She was given** a prize.

Want more?

Sophia explains **Nobody Broke It** (Philo & Sophia, Lesson 20).

See also Grammar Guides 5: **The Twelve Tenses**.

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