10

The Passive Voice

In an active sentence the subject acts; in a passive sentence the subject is acted upon: *Shakespeare **wrote** Hamlet* → *Hamlet **was written** by Shakespeare.*

10.1 Form

be (in the required tense) + past participle:

Present simple	*English **is spoken** here.*
Present progressive	*The road **is being repaired**.*
Past simple	*The letter **was sent** on Monday.*
Past progressive	*The house **was being painted**.*
Present perfect	*The files **have been deleted**.*
Past perfect	*The tickets **had been sold** out.*
Future	*The winners **will be announced** tomorrow.*
Modal	*This form **must be signed**. It **can't be done**.*
Modal perfect	*The email **may have been lost**.*
Infinitive / gerund	*She hopes **to be promoted**. He hates **being told** what to do.*

10.2 When to use the passive

1. **The agent is unknown or obvious:** *My bike **was stolen**. He **was arrested** last night* (obviously by the police).
2. **The agent is unimportant or general:** *Rice **is grown** in Asia. These watches **are made** in Switzerland.*
3. **To keep the topic in subject position:** *The cathedral was begun in 1163 and **was completed** a century later.*
4. **Formal and scientific style:** *The samples **were heated** to 90 °C. Participants **were asked** to complete a survey.*
5. **Tact — avoiding blame:** *Mistakes **were made**. The invoice **hasn't been paid** yet.*

Mention the agent with *by* only when it is newsworthy: *The novel was written **by a computer**.* Omit empty agents: ✗ *The thief was arrested by the police.* → usually just ✓ *The thief was arrested.*

Style & Register

Style guides warn against *overusing* the passive, not against using it at all. Prefer the active when the doer matters (*The committee rejected the proposal* is clearer than *The proposal was rejected*), and use the passive deliberately for the reasons above. Blanket "never use the passive" advice is itself poor advice.

10.3 Verbs with two objects

Either object of a verb like *give, send, offer, show, teach, tell* can become the passive subject; the person is the more common choice:

- Active: *They offered **her the job**.*
- Passive 1: ***She** was offered the job.* (preferred)
- Passive 2: ***The job** was offered to her.*

10.4 Reporting with the passive

For official or hedged statements, English uses two elegant patterns with verbs like *say, believe, think, know, report, expect, consider*:

1. *It* + *passive* + *that*-clause: ***It is believed that** the painting is a forgery.*
2. Subject + passive + *to*-infinitive: *The painting **is believed to be** a forgery. He **is thought to have left** the country.* (perfect infinitive for earlier time)

10.5 *get*-passives and *have something done*

- *get* + *participle* (informal, often for accidents/misfortune): *He **got hit** by a golf ball. She **got promoted**.*
- *have/get something done* (causative — arranging a service): *I'**m having** my car **serviced** tomorrow. We **got** the roof **fixed**.* Also misfortunes: *She **had** her bag **stolen**.* (See Chapter 22 for more.)

Common Error

- Intransitive verbs have no passive: ✗ *The accident was happened yesterday.* → ✓ *The accident happened yesterday.* Similarly *appear, arrive, die, occur, exist*.
- Don't drop *be*: ✗ *The report finished yesterday.* (if you mean someone finished it) → ✓ *The report was finished yesterday.*
- Keep the participle, not the past form: ✗ *The window was broke.* → ✓ *The window was broken.*

Exercises

Exercise 10.1 Transform

Turn the active sentences into passives; omit the agent if it is not needed.

1. Somebody cleans the office every evening.
2. They are building a new stadium near the river.
3. The chef has prepared all the dishes by hand.
4. People say that the water in this spring heals wounds. (two ways)
5. You must return the equipment by Friday.
6. A local artist painted the mural in 1998.

Exercise 10.2 Active or passive?

Choose the better voice and justify briefly.

1. (A: The police arrested the suspect. / B: The suspect was arrested.) — news headline focus on the suspect
2. (A: Researchers heated the mixture. / B: The mixture was heated.) — methods section of a paper
3. (A: My assistant will send you the contract. / B: The contract will be sent to you by my assistant.) — business email where the assistant matters

Exercise 10.3 have something done

Rewrite using *have/get + object + participle*.

1. A hairdresser cut my hair yesterday.
2. A builder is going to repair our garage door.
3. Thieves stole her passport while she was travelling.