Passive forms

The action or situation described in a sentence can be viewed in two ways, without changing the truth value of the facts reported, by using the active or the passive voice:

*A fireman saved the kid from the fire*
*The kid was saved from the fire by a fireman*

Switching from the active to the passive voice involves a series of syntactic transformations and affects the information dynamics of the sentence. The object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence; thus, the person or thing affected by an action (the recipient) becomes the subject and theme of the passive sentence. The subject of the active sentence becomes the agent of the passive construction (the preposition by introduces the agent). As we shall see below in more detail, it is not necessary to mention the agent; indeed, this is left out most of the times. The active verb is substituted by the auxiliary be – in the same tense as the active verb – followed by the past participle of the lexical verb:

*The supporters of the team insulted the referee (active)*
*The referee was insulted (by the supporters of the team) (passive)*

Only a sentence that has a transitive verb can be made passive. Most transitive verbs are used in both the active and the passive voice*: the active is the most frequent, unmarked voice, whereas passives are often used to achieve special rhetorical effect. The passive is uncommon in conversation. As for writing, it is more frequent in informative prose than in fiction, especially when a “detached”, “objective” style is required, as in academic, scientific or official publications. Actually, using the passive causes a switch in register, since passive structures are more formal than the corresponding active constructions. That is why, especially in spoken English, an empty subject (*people, they, you, one, someone*) is often used instead of the passive:

*Someone has broken into my house (rather than My house has been broken into)*

The passive allows speakers/writers to focus on what has happened rather than on who or what has performed a certain action, and secondarily on the person or thing that has been affected by it. Not surprisingly, in a passive sentence the agent is usually left unmentioned (only about 20% of passive clauses specify it). This occurs for several reasons; because the agent is not important or relatively unimportant (it does not provide any new or useful information, for example), because it is unknown or difficult to identify, or because the speaker prefers not to mention the cause of a certain event.

* Not all transitive verbs can be used in the passive. The following list includes verbs which hardly ever occur in this form: agree, exclaim, guess, hate, have, hesitate, joke, lack, let, like, love, mind, pretend, quit, reply, resemble, suit, try, want, watch, wish, wonder. Single-object prepositional verbs – such as agree with, belong to, come across, compete with, cope with, correspond to, glance at, listen to – are also rarely used in the passive, with some exceptions (for example, rely on):

*This sentence lacks any meaning (*Any meaning is lacked ...*)

*They listened to the speaker very attentively (*The speaker was listened to ...*)

Some verbs are instead generally or often used in the passive voice: aligned (with), approved, associated (with), attributed (to), based (on), born, classified (as), composed (of), confined (to), coupled (with), deemed, designed, diagnosed (as), distributed, effected, entitled (to), estimated, grouped, inclined, intended, labelled, linked (to/with), located (at/in), obliged, positioned, recruited, situated, stained, stored, subjected (to), viewed.
In a sentence such as: *The President of the United States has been assassinated*, what is given prominence is the event (the assassination of the President) rather than who has pulled the trigger.

The following sentences provide some more examples of agentless passives:

- A new video store will be opened
- The Embassy has been attacked
- Tax cuts have been postponed

The agent is specified only when the speaker/writer needs or wants to make the identity of the semantic actor explicit:

- The laptop has been taken away by your brother

Long passives (those which specify the agent) are also often used when the active construction would have a lengthy subject, which it is better to place at the end of the sentence. For example: *The player that has just been hired by Chelsea has scored two goals* is better rendered as: *Two goals have been scored by the player that …*

When it is expressed, the agent becomes focal, since it occupies the last position in the clause (normally reserved for new information). Consider the following example:

- The President of the United States has been assassinated by religious fanatics

Contrary to what we have seen above, in this case the assassination of the President is treated as given (probably, though not necessarily, an already-known fact), while the identity of the killers constitutes the focus (the new information) of the sentence.

Obviously, empty subjects such as *they* or *someone* do not normally appear as agents in passive constructions since they would be in a focal position (at the end of the sentence) without conveying any significant information.

The passive can be used in the present and past tense, and in both the progressive and perfective aspect; furthermore, it can also be combined with a modal or with a modal and perfective aspect together. Some examples of passive structures:

- German is spoken here
- The President was elected yesterday
- The factory has been shut down
- Everything will be done by next week
- Everything will have been done by next week
- Criminals must be kept in prison
- So many police cars! Some major bank must have been robbed
- The bridge is being built
- The bridge was being built when the tragedy happened

---

6 Since verbs cannot become the focus of cleft-sentences, an agentless passive construction is the only way to lay emphasis on the sentence verb: *Finally, the new European constitution has been APPROVED.*
The combinations “be being” and “been being” are awkward, and thus tend not to be used. Sentences such as the following are very unlikely to occur:

- This time next year the bridge will be being built
- Surely, the issue must have been being discussed when the meeting was adjourned

The progressive passive is rare, though it sometimes occurs in news and academic writing; the perfective passive is more common, especially in the present (once again, used more frequently in news and academic prose). Notice that the progressive passive has no equivalent in Italian. Progressive passives can usually be translated into Italian by using an impersonal form:

- The road is/was being repaired = stanno/stavano riparando la strada

The passive with “get”, as an informal alternative to the passive with “be”, is often employed when something happens by accident, suddenly or unexpectedly:

- The car got hit by a boulder

In passive constructions prepositions must not be detached from the verb:

- The problem has not been dealt with
- The children are being looked after

Many verbs are ditransitive, that is to say they can be followed by two objects, usually a person and a thing. Therefore, two passive constructions are possible, one which puts the direct and the other the indirect object into subject position. Generally, it is the person who becomes the subject of the passive sentence:

- My friends have sent me many e-mails lately
- I have been sent many e-mails lately
- Many e-mails have been sent to me lately

Passive sentences can have a that clause as subject. However, the pronoun it is usually employed as an introductory subject:

- Many people believe that television affects political opinions (active)
- That television affects political opinions is widely believed (formal, uncommon)
- It is widely believed that television affects political opinions

There are some categories of verbs, verbs of “asking”, “ordering”, “allowing”, “thinking”, “saying” and “reporting” that can be used in the passive followed by an infinitive:

- We were asked to participate in the discussion
- I was told to leave
- They were allowed to enter the castle
- He was thought to be a violent man
- She is said to be a great actress
“Have/get something done” (the construction with “get” is more informal).

- I had my house painted
- I’m having my car washed
- You must get this job done by tomorrow

“Have” is also used when someone experiences something, usually unpleasant:

- I had my car stolen

**Infinitives: active and passive**

The active infinitive is used when the subject of the sentence is the person who has to do the action; the passive infinitive is used when the subject of the sentence is the action that has to be done or the person/thing the action is done to:

- I have a lot of papers to grade
- This car is to be washed

After *there is/are* both constructions are possible. The active infinitive is chosen when we think more about the person who has to do the action than about the action itself:

- There’s work to do // There’s work to be done
- There are many people to contact // to be contacted

Note the difference between *something/anything/nothing to do* and *something/anything/nothing to be done*:

- There’s nothing to do. I’m bored
- There’s nothing to be done. You’ll have to buy a new car

After some verbs (such as consider, regard, see, call, elect, make) the direct object can be followed by a noun or an adjective which describes the object (an object complement). Such sentences can be made passive:

- People consider him a genius // He is considered to be a genius
- They elected him president of the committee // He was elected president

After the verbs *need, require* and *want* the *-ing form* is used in a passive sense (*need* can also be followed by a passive infinitive):

- My plants need watering (to be watered)
- My car wants servicing
- My shirt requires pressing