

a *Active and passive* Study this example:



This house **was built** in 1920.

This is a *passive* sentence. Compare:

Somebody **built** this house in 1920. (*active*)

This house **was built** in 1920. (*passive*)

We often prefer the passive when it is not so important who or what did the action. In this example, it is not so important (or not known) who built the house.

In a passive sentence, if you want to say who did or what caused the action, use **by**:

- This house was built **by my grandfather**. (= my grandfather built it)
- Have you ever been bitten **by a dog**? (= Has a dog ever bitten you?)

b In passive sentences we use the correct form of **be (is/are/was/were/has been, etc.)** + the *past participle*:

(be) done (be) cleaned (be) damaged (be) built (be) seen

For irregular past participles (**done/seen/written**, etc.) see Appendix 2.

For the passive of the present and past tenses see Unit 41.

c We use the base form (... **be done, be cleaned, be built**, etc.) after modal verbs (**will, can, must**, etc.) and some other verbs (for example: **have to, be going to, want to**). Compare:

Active: We **can solve** this problem.

Passive: This problem **can be solved**.

- The new hotel **will be opened** next year.
- George **might be sent** to Venezuela by his company in August.
- The music at the party was very loud and **could be heard** from far away.
- This room **is going to be painted** next week.
- Go away! I **want to be left** alone.

d There is a *past* form after modal verbs: **have been done / have been cleaned**, etc.:

Active: Somebody **should have cleaned** the windows yesterday.

Passive: The windows **should have been cleaned** yesterday.

- My bicycle has disappeared. It **must have been stolen**.
- She **wouldn't have been injured** if she had been wearing a seat belt.
- The weather was terrible. The tennis match **should have been canceled**.

These are the passive forms of the present and past tenses:

Simple present **am/is/are + done/cleaned, etc.**

Active: Somebody **cleans** this room every day.

Passive: This room **is cleaned** every day.

Many accidents **are caused** by dangerous driving.

I'm **not often invited** to parties.

How many people **are injured** in car accidents every day?

Simple past **was/were + done/cleaned, etc.**

Active: Somebody **cleaned** this room yesterday.

Passive: This room **was cleaned** yesterday.

During the night we **were all woken** up by a loud explosion.

When **was** that castle **built**?

The house **wasn't damaged** in the storm, but a tree **was blown** down.

Present continuous **am/is/are being + done/cleaned, etc.**

Active: Somebody **is cleaning** the room right now.

Passive: The room **is being cleaned** right now.

Look at those old houses! They **are being knocked** down.

(shop assistant to customer) Are you **being helped**, ma'am?

Past continuous **was/were being + done/cleaned, etc.**

Active: Somebody **was cleaning** the room when I arrived.

Passive: The room **was being cleaned** when I arrived.

Suddenly I heard footsteps behind me. We **were being followed**.

Present perfect **have/has been + done/cleaned, etc.**

Active: The room looks nice. Somebody **has cleaned** it.

Passive: The room looks nice. It **has been cleaned**.

Have you heard the news? The President **has been shot**.

Have you ever **been bitten** by a dog?

I'm not going to the party. I **haven't been invited**.

Past perfect **had been + done/cleaned, etc.**

Active: The room looked much better. Somebody **had cleaned** it.

Passive: The room looked much better. It **had been cleaned**.

Jim didn't know about the change of plans. He **hadn't been told**.

a Some verbs can have two objects. For example, **offer**:

- They didn't offer **Ann the job**. (the two objects are **Ann** and **the job**)

So it is possible to make two different passive sentences:

- **Ann** wasn't offered the job.
- **The job** wasn't offered to Ann.

It is more usual for the passive sentence to begin with the person.

Other verbs like **offer** that can have two objects are:

ask tell give send show teach pay

Here are some examples of passive sentences with these verbs:

- I was **given** two hours to make my decision. (= they gave **me two hours**)
- **The men** were **paid** \$1500 to do the job. (= someone paid **the men \$1500**)
- **Have you been shown** the new machine? (= has anyone shown **you the new machine**?)

b **Born**: Remember that **be born** is a *passive* verb and is usually past:

- Where **were you born**? (*not* are you born) } *simple past*
- I **was born** in Chicago. (*not* I am born) }
- How many babies **are born** in this hospital every day? –*simple present*

c The passive **-ing** form is **being done / being cleaned**, etc.:

Active: I don't like people **telling** me what to do.

Passive: I don't like **being told** what to do.

- I remember **being given** a toy drum on my fifth birthday. (= I remember someone giving me . . .)
- Hurry up! You know Mr. Miller hates **being kept** waiting. (= he hates people keeping him waiting)
- She climbed over the wall without **being seen**. (= without anyone seeing her)

d Sometimes you can use **get** instead of **be** in the passive:

- There was a fight at the party, but nobody **got** hurt. (= nobody was hurt)
- **Did Ann get** fired from her new job? (= was Ann fired from her new job?)

You can use **get** in the passive to say that something happens to someone or something.

Often the action is not planned; it happens by chance:

- The dog **got** run over by a car. (= the dog was run over)

In other types of situation **get** is not usually possible:

- George **is** liked by everyone. (*not* gets liked)

Get is used mainly in informal spoken English. You can use **be** in all situations.

a Study this example situation:



This is Mary. She is very old, and nobody knows exactly how old she is. But:

It is said that **she** is 108 years old.

She is said to be 108 years old.

Both these sentences mean: "People say that she is 108 years old."

You can also use these structures with:

thought	believed	reported	understood
known	expected	alleged	considered

It is said that Mary eats ten eggs a day.	or	Mary is said to eat ten eggs a day.
It is believed that the wanted man is living in New York.	or	The wanted man is believed to be living in New York.
It is expected that the strike will begin tomorrow.	or	The strike is expected to begin tomorrow.
It is alleged that he stole \$100.	or	He is alleged to have stolen \$100.
It was alleged that he stole \$100.	or	He was alleged to have stolen \$100.

These structures are often used in news reports:

It is reported that two people were killed in the explosion.	or	Two people are reported to have been killed in the explosion.
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b Supposed to

Sometimes **(be) supposed to** means "said to":

- Let's go and see that movie. It's **supposed to be** very good. (= It is said to be very good; people say that it's very good.)
- He is **supposed to have stolen** \$100. (= He is said to have stolen \$100.)

But sometimes **supposed to** has a different meaning. You can use **supposed to** to say what is planned or arranged (and this is often different from what really happens):

- I'd better hurry. It's nearly 8:00. I'm **supposed to be meeting** Ann at 8:15. (= I arranged to meet Ann; I said I would meet Ann.)
- The train was **supposed to arrive** at 11:30, but it was 40 minutes late. (= The train should have arrived at 11:30, according to the schedule.)
- You were **supposed to clean** the windows. Why didn't you do it?

We use **not supposed to** to say what is not allowed or not advisable:

- You're **not supposed to park** here. (= You aren't allowed to park here.)
- Mr. Jenkins is much better after his illness, but he's still **not supposed to do** any heavy work.

Using passives

The choice between an active and passive sentence allows us to present the same information in two different orders. Compare:

active • The storm damaged the roof.

This sentence is about *the storm*, and says what it did. [*The storm* is the 'agent'.]

passive • The roof was damaged by the storm.

This sentence is about *the roof*, and says what happened to it. (The 'agent' goes in a prepositional phrase with *by* after the verb.)

Here are some situations where we typically choose a passive rather than an active.

- When the agent is not known, is 'people in general', is unimportant, or is obvious, we prefer passives. In an active sentence we need to include the agent as subject; using a passive allows us to omit the agent by leaving out the prepositional phrase with **by**:
 - My office **was broken into** when I was on holiday. (unknown agent)
 - An order form **can be found** on page 2. (agent = people in general)
 - These boxes **should be handled** with care. (unimportant agent)
 - She **is being treated** in hospital. (obvious agent; presumably 'doctors')
- In factual writing, particularly in describing procedures or processes, we often wish to omit the agent, and use passives:
 - Nuclear waste will still be radioactive even after 20,000 years, so it **must be disposed of** very carefully. **It can be stored** as a liquid in stainless-steel containers which **are encased** in concrete. The most dangerous nuclear waste **can be turned** into glass. **It is planned** to store this glass in deep underground mines.
- In spoken English we often use a subject such as **people, somebody, they, we, or you** even when we do not know who the agent is. In formal English, particularly writing, we often prefer to use a passive. Compare:
 - **They're installing** the new computer system next month.
 - The new computer system **is being installed** next month. (more formal)Notice also that some verbs have corresponding nouns. These nouns can be used as the subject of passive sentences, with a new passive verb introduced:
 - The **installation** of the new computer system **will be completed** by next month.
- In English we usually prefer to put old information at the beginning of a sentence (or clause) and new information at the end. Choosing the passive often allows us to do this. Compare these two texts and notice where the old information (in *italics*) and new information (in **bold**) is placed in the second sentence of each. The second text uses a passive:
 - The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. **The Boron Group in Germany** manufactured *the machines*.
 - The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. *The machines* were manufactured **by the Boron Group in Germany**.
- It is often more natural to put agents (subjects) which consist of long expressions at the end of a sentence. Using the passive allows us to do this. So, for example:
 - **I was surprised** *by Don's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney*.is more natural than '*Don's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney* surprised me.'