

Lecture 4: Impersonal Forms

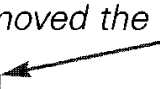
*One of the most striking features of scientific English is the intensive use of the **passive** and other **impersonal forms**. The passive form alone accounts for roughly 35% of all verbs found in general scientific texts. What is the reason for this? By using the passive, the focus can be placed on the action – on "**what was done**" and not "**who did it**". Science is not particularly interested in the actor ("I", "you", "she"). It is the action or result that matters.*

Functions & Grammar

KEY POINTS – IMPERSONAL FORMS

1. The passive

Why is the passive so common in scientific, administrative and formal written English? It is because these registers are concerned with **processes and events** more than they are with the actors. The active form, however, is much more common in literature and the spoken language where it is people who are the focus of attention. In the following example, it can be seen how the transformation from active to passive **evacuates** the actor G. Notes 25.

- The doctor removed the **cataract**.
- The **cataract** was removed.
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By placing the complement at the beginning of the sentence, it is the importance of the action (the subject + the verb) that is stressed.

Note – Passives and modals

The passive is frequently used in conjunction with the modals.

- Huge amounts of energy **must be used** to break atomic bonds.
- Thanks to ice-nucleating bacteria, artificial snow **can be produced** in greater quantities.

2. Impersonal forms: it

The impersonal form can also be expressed by using "it" as a subject. The following patterns are particularly frequent in academic English:

■ **IT + PASSIVE VERBS EXPRESSING OPINIONS AND BELIEFS + THAT ...**

(it is often said • it is widely believed • it is commonly thought • it is sometimes maintained • it has been suggested ...)

- **It is sometimes *maintained*** that the movement of the stars influences our lives.

■ **IT + MODAL PASSIVE + THAT ...**

(it should be realised that • it must not be forgotten that • it could be said that ...)

- **It should be noted** that a similar heating process has been used before.

■ **IT + TO BE + ADJECTIVE + TO / THAT CLAUSE**

(it is impossible • it is important • it is essential • it is crucial ...)

3. "-ing"

The "-ing" form" is a powerful way of expressing impersonal ideas. Notice that the action (**verb + -ing**) is frequently introduced at the front of the sentence.

- We require 4,000 million bits to record 45 minutes of hi-fi stereo.
Recording 45 minutes of hi-fi stereo requires 4,000 million bits.
- We can increase conductivity if we reduce the temperature.
By reducing the temperature, conductivity can be increased.