

Actives, passives and ergatives

English has active and passive voices. The active voice tells you what the subject of a sentence does. The passive voice creates a new subject. The active voice is more common than the passive. Using the passive voice changes the focus of your sentence. You can use a passive when you want to emphasise the action itself, when the reader does not need to know who did an action, or when you do not want to emphasise who did an action (as long as you leave out the word *by* and the name, e.g. *by Ching*).

Only transitive verbs (verbs which take a direct object) can be made passive. (Examples of transitive verbs are *break, buy, make*.) Intransitive verbs do not take an object and cannot be made passive. (Examples of intransitive verbs are *cough, laugh, go*.)

If you are not sure if a verb is transitive or intransitive in English, try putting an object after it.

Transitive:

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
Robin	started	the group project.

Question: What did Robin start? Answer: The group project. Therefore 'started' is transitive.

Intransitive:

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
Robin	laughed.	

Question: What did Robin laugh? Answer: Nothing. Therefore 'laugh' is intransitive.

Some verbs can be either transitive or intransitive, depending on the context. (e.g. *I ran the race* (transitive); *I ran* (intransitive)) If you want to know if a verb is transitive or intransitive, look in a learner's dictionary of English. Good online learner's dictionaries that you can access free of charge are <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, <http://www.mycobuild.com/free-search.aspx>, <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>, <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/>, <http://www.learnersdictionary.com/>, <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>

In active sentences, the subject of the sentence is the one doing the action.

In passive sentences, the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence.

Active

SUBJECT

Robin

VERB

started

OBJECT

the group project.

Passive

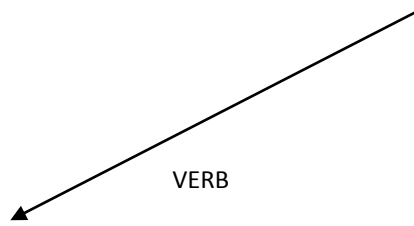
SUBJECT

The group project

VERB

was started

by Robin.



The subject can be a person, an animal or an inanimate object and we can use the passive for *I, you, he, she, it, we* or *they* in English. English therefore uses the passive voice in situations that may not be possible in other languages.

Past participle or present participle?

The past participle in a passive can act like an adjective.

e.g. *The essay was thoroughly researched.*

This can refer to the *fact* that the essay had been thought about carefully, or to the *action* that the student did when writing the essay. If you want to tell if a past participle is being used in a passive construction or as an adjective, see if you need to add the words *by* and a noun, or whether you can substitute an adjective for the past participle.

e.g. *The essay was thoroughly researched by Anna.*

This emphasises the action (*research*) and adds a person who did the action (*Anna*).

e.g. *The essay was thoroughly researched. Well done!*

This emphasises the fact that the essay was well researched. You could replace the past participle with an adjective:

e.g. *The essay was excellent. Well done!*

If you are using a passive construction, you should use a past participle:

e.g.	I was bored by the speech	– passive
	The speech bored me	– active
	I was interested by what you said	– passive
	What you said interested me	– active

If you are using an active construction, you can use a present participle:

e.g. *I am boring* (= people find me boring; I talk for a long time about things that are not interesting). *Boring* is a present participle used as an adjective.

I am interesting (= people find me interesting; they like what I say). *Interesting* is a present participle used as an adjective.

Forming the passive

To form the passive, you need a form of the verb *to be* + a past participle. It is the verb *to be* that indicates the tense of your sentence.

e.g. *Robin started the group project.* – Active

Started is in the past simple, so you need to put the verb *to be* into that tense (*to be* → *was*) and add the past participle of the verb *start*:

e.g. *The group project was started by Robin.* – Passive

Ergative verbs/Middle voice

Now look at these sentences:

- 1) *Robin started the group project.* – Active
- 2) *The group project was started by Robin.* – Passive
- 3) *The group project started.* – ?

Sentence 3 uses an **ergative verb**. An ergative verb can change an object into a subject without needing to use a passive. This is sometimes called the ‘middle voice’.

Active

SUBJECT

Robin

VERB

started

OBJECT

the group project.

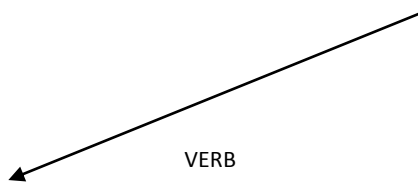
Ergative verb

SUBJECT

The group project

VERB

started.



Why do I need to use ergative verbs?

Using ergative verbs will make you sound more like a native speaker of English. For example, native speakers do not say *The figures were decreased*; they say *The figures decreased*. *Decreased* is an ergative verb. To check if a verb can be used in this way, look at the list of ergative verbs on the English for Uni website.

Ergative verbs are a step further on from the active and the passive.

1) *Robin started the group project.* – Active.
The emphasis is on Robin as the person responsible for starting the group project.

2) *The group project was started by Robin.* – Passive
The emphasis is on the group project and on the fact that someone started it, rather than on the person who started it. We could even remove the name and say: *The group project was started.*
That would emphasise the action without naming the person who started it.

3) *The group project started.* – Ergative verb
The emphasis is entirely on the action. We do not know who is responsible. It is as though the project started all by itself. In some languages you could indicate this with a reflexive verb. In other languages the sentence would not be possible. In English it is possible because of the ergative verb *start*.

Get and have

There are two other verbs which are associated with passive-type constructions: *get* and *have*. For example, you can *get/have something done*, which means that someone does something for you, often at your request. This introduces a third person or thing to the action, even if you do not name them. *Have* is more formal than *get*. *Get* is not used much in academic writing.

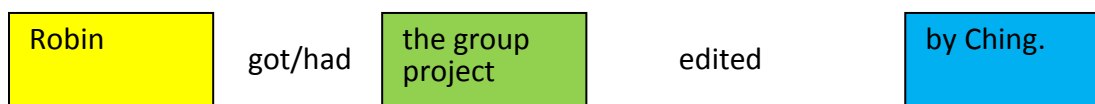
e.g. *Robin got/had the editing done by Ching.*

In the active it would look like this:

Active



Passive



Get and *have* are called 'causative' verbs because a person causes something to happen. (Other causative verbs, such as *help*, *let* and *make*, do not work in the same way, because they are followed by an infinitive form, with or without the word *to*: *Ching helped Robin to edit the project*; *Robin let Ching help edit the project*; *Robin made Ching edit the project*.)

There is another use of *get* and *have* which is not causative. When *get* and *have* are non-causative, they are more likely to have human subjects and are more often, though not always, used for negative effects.

- e.g. *She had her necklace stolen.* (negative)
She got knocked over by a bicycle. (negative)
She got promoted last year. (positive)

When to use the passive

The first noun/subject in a sentence in English is usually the strongest one.

- e.g. *Robin started the group project.* – Robin is the main focus of the sentence.
The group project was started by Robin. – The group project is the main focus of the sentence.
The group project started. – The group project is the main focus of the sentence.
Robin had the group project edited by Ching. – Robin is the main focus of the sentence.

Some people say that the passive should be avoided as much as possible, because it makes a person's writing less clear and less interesting. However, there are many situations (as in *the passive should be avoided*) where the passive is useful. In academic writing, scientific disciplines use the passive voice more than subjects in the humanities, arts or social sciences.

It is good to use the passive in scientific writing in the case of:

- scientific experiments
- inanimate subjects (e.g. *thermometer*)
- abstract subjects (e.g. *temperature*)

The passive is also used often with these verbs:

- *X is related to Y.*
- *X was designed to do Y.*
- *X and Y are linked.*
- *X results were obtained.*
- *X was used to do Y.*

Passives can also be used after modal verbs:

- *The passive can be used.*
- *The results may be related to other findings.*
- *The phrase could be expressed differently.*

In all the above cases, you do not need to know who did the action, so you do not need to say *by...*

Some verbs do not usually appear in the active form:

- e.g. *I was born in 1996.*
He's called Professor Grahamarian.
It is reputed to be a good language school, but the administration is terrible.
The process was deemed satisfactory.
She was hospitalised.

Verbs that have prepositions can be made passive, but we do not do this if the sentence becomes clumsy, with too many prepositions at the end.

- e.g. *This is something that won't be put up with.*

English does not usually use the passive for nouns appearing after prepositions.

e.g. **The table was put the plates on.* This sounds wrong in English. We would say, *The plates were put on the table, or Someone put the plates on the table.*

Active instead of passive

The more involved someone is with the action, the more likely you are to use the active voice.

e.g. *I picked that flower.*

NOT *That flower was picked by me.*

You would only use the passive here if you were answering a question such as *Who was that flower picked by?* Even that question is unusual, and it is more likely that someone would ask *Who picked that flower?* and you would answer *I did* or *I picked that flower.*

If the action has a serious effect on the person, we would also use the active:

e.g. *She contracted measles and became blind in 1888.*

NOT *Measles was contracted by her and she became blind in 1888.*

Stative verbs also do not usually appear in the passive:

e.g. *You weigh 60 kilos.*

We like chocolate.

They understand English perfectly.

(Visit the [Perfect English Grammar](#) website for a comprehensive list of stative verbs and explanations about how to use them.)

by – saying who did something (this is called the ‘agent’)

It is often not necessary to include the agent of a passive.

e.g. *The mixture was heated in a test-tube.*

We do not need to add ‘by the researchers’, because we assume that the people conducting the experiment and writing about it were the ones who heated the mixture in a test-tube.

We need to include the agent more often if it is important to know that information.

e.g. *She was knocked over by a bicycle.* (not by a car, skateboard or motorbike)
The Moonlight Sonata was composed by Beethoven.

If we just say

The Moonlight Sonata was composed.

the sentence feels incomplete because music is always composed so we do not need to say this. We could add a date:

The Moonlight Sonata was composed in 1801.

In this case, if we leave out the name of the composer, we are assuming that everyone has heard of the Moonlight Sonata, and either they know it was written by Beethoven or they don’t need to know who the composer was.

by or with?

by is used to show who or what did something.

e.g. *She was knocked over by a bicycle.*

A *bicycle* is the agent in this sentence.

with is used to show how something happened, or the means by which it happened.

e.g. *The mixture was beaten with a fork.*

In this case, *fork* is not the agent. We can't say **The mixture was beaten by a fork.* (The * symbol means that this sentence is not correct.) Somebody (an unknown agent) beat the mixture and used a fork to do this.

As shown by (linking *as*-clauses)

Compare:

(a) *As the graph shows*, there was a fall in temperature.

(b) *As shown by the graph*, there was a fall in temperature.

Sentence a is active. Sentence b is passive, with *the graph* as the agent. (You can tell because it follows the word *by*.)

(c) *Anna showed* this fall in temperature in a graph.

(d) This fall in temperature *was shown* in a graph (by Anna).

Sentence c is active. It shows us who (*Anna*) did (*showed*) what (*this fall in temperature*) where (*in a graph*).

Sentence d is passive. It emphasises what (*this fall in temperature*) happened (*was shown*) where (*in a graph*). We may not need to know who did the action, but if we want to know we can add the agent (*by Anna*).

(e) *As shown in the graph*, there was a fall in temperature.

Sentence e just tells us that there is a graph and it shows us something (*there was a fall in temperature*). This use of *as* is called a '**linking *as*-clause**'. It is still a passive construction, but we do not see all the words and we cannot tell who put the information into the graph:

(f) *As (it is) shown in the graph*, there was a fall in temperature.

The sentence is therefore a shortened relative clause (see below). We could rewrite it:

(g) *There was a fall in temperature, which was shown in the graph.*

We could also say:

(h) *As is shown in the graph*, there was a fall in temperature.

Learners of English often want to include *it is* and add the word *that*:

(i) * *As it is shown in the graph* that there was a fall in temperature.

This is not correct. First, just like sentence e, *as* here is not the same as *because*. This means that the sentence is incomplete.

In some places, however, *as* **does** equal *because*:

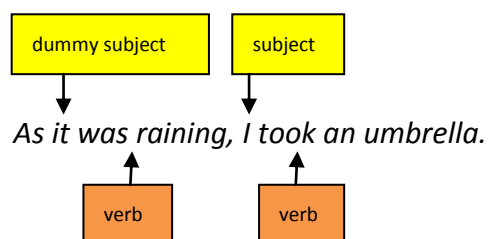
(j) *As it was raining, I took an umbrella.*

This is the same as:

(k) *Because it was raining, I took an umbrella.*

It in sentences g and h does not refer to any other noun in the sentence. In these sentences *it* is called a 'dummy subject'.

How do you know if *as* means *because*? If *as* is used to indicate a reason, there should be two parts (clauses) to your sentence, each containing a subject and verb:



You could also rewrite the sentence using *therefore*:

It was raining; therefore I took an umbrella.

Now compare:

(l) *Because it has been widely circulated, the idea may be important.*

(m) *As it has been widely circulated, the idea may be important.*

Sentences i and j say the same thing:

(n) *The idea may be important because many people have circulated the idea.*

In sentences i and j the word *it* refers to *the idea*.

If we use *as* in the meaning of *because*, we can rewrite sentence f to make it a complete sentence:

(o) *As it is shown in the graph that there was a fall in temperature, we need to regulate the air conditioning.*

However, if we just want to say that there is a graph and it shows us something, then we do not use *it* or *that*. Here are some more examples:

(p) *As indicated in Figure 1, the passive is used differently in other languages.*

(q) *As revealed earlier, ergative verbs are very useful when writing English.*

You can also put the *as*-clause second:

(r) *There was a change in grades, as can be seen in the chart.*

(s) *The sea levels are rising, as demonstrated by recent data.*

Relative clauses

Passives can be used in shortened relative clauses. In that case they do not need the relative pronoun (words like *which*, *that* or *who*).

e.g. *The project (that was) financed by Grabbit Bank was unsuccessful.*

You do not need to include the words 'that was'. Here are some more examples:

The man (who was) born to be king lived in a small house.

The diamonds (which had been) hidden under the ground were priceless.

The passive in different tenses

Tense	Active	Passive
Present simple	Robin starts the project.	The project is started (by Robin).
Present continuous	Robin is starting the project.	The project is being started (by Robin).
Present perfect	Robin has started the project.	The project has been started (by Robin).
Past simple	Robin started the project.	The project was started (by Robin).
Past continuous	Robin was starting the project.	The project was being started (by Robin).
Past perfect	Robin had started the project.	The project had been started (by Robin).
Future simple	Robin will start the project.	The project will be started (by Robin).
Future continuous	Robin will be starting the project.	The project will be being started (by Robin).
Future perfect	Robin will have started the project.	The project will have been started (by Robin).

Look at the song from the video "Stolen on the Outback Express". Some verbs are in the active voice, some are in the passive voice and some are ergative verbs:

I used to be so passive
 Every door *was closed* to me. (passive)
 I used to be so passive
 No door *was opened* to me. (passive)
 Then the door *opened* (ergative)
 It *opened* ergatively. (ergative)
 So I *pushed* it open (active)
 I *opened* it actively. (active)
 Now I'm no longer passive
 I *open* every door that I see (active)
 No, I'm no longer passive
 The door is wide open for me.

Unaccusative verbs – for advanced grammar lovers

Linguists often divide verbs into unaccusative and unergative. Ergative verbs are sometimes called 'unaccusative' verbs. There is debate over whether they are identical to unaccusatives (e.g. Newson et al., 2007), but many linguists see them as the same. However, purely intransitive verbs cannot be ergative, because ergative verbs are between transitive and intransitive.

In practice, unaccusatives and unergatives are divided like this:

Transitive features	Intransitive	
a. unaccusative (with transitive features), i.e. ergative (which can be active, passive or middle, so has to be based on a transitive verb)	b. unaccusative (without transitive features)	c. unergative
The door opened.	The car disappeared.	The cat jumped.
The snow melted.	The walkers emerged.	The athletes ran.
The rules changed.	The tree vanished in the fog.	The baby sneezed.

The difference between unaccusative and unergative is that unergative verbs can add a noun afterwards:

The cat jumped (a great jump out of the tree) ✓
The athletes ran (a long race) ✓
The baby sneezed (a huge sneeze) ✓

Unaccusative verbs cannot add a noun afterwards when they are intransitive or in the middle voice. We cannot say:

**The car disappeared a disappearance. X*

Further reading

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