

Passives Exercise 1

Here is the text for the “Stolen on the Outback Express” video story. Can you identify which of the underlined verbs are in the active voice and which are in the passive voice? Are there any ergative verbs? If so, how are they used? (There is a separate list of ergative verbs and an explanation about them on the English for Uni website. They are verbs like ‘open’, which can be active, passive or in the middle.)

Can you put the active verbs into the passive voice, and the passive verbs into the active voice? Is it always possible? What different effects are achieved by using active, passive or ergative verbs?

One of my easiest cases involved the famous singers Kareena Kapadia and Bobby Dylan.

Both women liked jewellery, especially pearls.

Although we had never met, we were all travelling on the same train, along with Professor Grahamarian and Harumi Kaga, the famous chef.

I was drinking a cup of tea when I was summoned to solve a little mystery.

Bobby was in the lounge carriage being served a drink and put her pearl necklace on the table.

She went out to have her nails manicured and closed the door. She was seen leaving by the famous chef Harumi Kaga.

The train’s speed increased and the necklace fell off the table.

Another famous singer, Bollywood star Kareena Kapadia, was also travelling on the train.

She proceeded to put her own pearl necklace on the table before leaving the lounge.

Professor Grahamarian saw her go out.

Bobby came back in.

“My necklace has vanished!” cried Bobby.

Kareena entered and looked for *her* necklace, as she wanted to get it cleaned.

It too had vanished.

“My necklace has been stolen!” cried Kareena.

“What are you doing at my table?” asked Bobby.

“What are you doing at *my* table?” asked Kareena.

“It’s *my* table and I’m looking for my necklace. It has been stolen. It was given to me by Prince Wolfgang,” said Bobby.

'My necklace has been stolen and my necklace was given to me by Prince Wolfgang!' replied Kareena.

"He gave it to me first!" they exclaimed together.

"What's the matter?" asked Professor Grahamarian.

"My necklace has been stolen," said Bobby.

"Someone has taken my necklace," said Kareena.

"Are you sure? Who could have stolen them?" asked Professor Grahamarian.

"I think it was someone employed by the railway," said Bobby accusingly.

"Or maybe you have them *both*!" said Kareena angrily.

"Dear dear," said Professor Grahamarian. "I think we should get Ms Parrot to come and help."

I was sitting in the library carriage having a cup of tea with sugar and lemon, as I was suffering from a terrible cold. The hot tea quickly dissolved the sugar and I was enjoying a book which discussed different people's use of the English passive. But Professor Grahamarian interrupted me.

"Ms Parrot. I'm so sorry to disturb you, but your presence is required," he said urgently. I followed him to the lounge carriage.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"Someone has taken my necklace," cried Bobby.

"My necklace has been stolen!" cried Kareena.

"And Prince Wolfgang gave it to me!" they exclaimed together.

"He has stolen my necklace, I'm sure of it," said Bobby, pointing at the railway employee.

"I have been called many things in this job, but I've never been called a thief!" said the employee indignantly.

"You should be arrested!" replied Bobby in disgust.

I looked around me and then asked, "Have you looked under that napkin?"

"A napkin on the floor?" exclaimed the railway employee. "It's my job to pick it up!"

He did so, and lifted up the two necklaces. Or did he pull them from his sleeve? We shall never know

"It looks as though nothing has been stolen," I said. "The necklaces must have dropped onto the floor and got covered by that napkin. As this story shows, events need to be analysed very carefully before anyone assumes the worst."

Answers to Passives Exercise 1

One of my easiest cases involved the famous singers Kareena Kapadia and Bobby Dylan. (active)

The active sentence emphasises one of Ms Parrot's cases.

→ (passive) The famous singers Kareena Kapadia and Bobby Dylan were involved in one of Ms Parrot's easiest cases.

Both women liked jewellery (active)

The active sentence emphasises the women as people who like jewellery.

→ (passive) Jewellery was liked by both women.

This is technically possible, but it sounds strange in English. That is because 'like' is a stative verb, and we generally prefer indefinite agents when we make stative verbs passive. e.g. 'Jewellery was liked by everyone' is better than 'Jewellery was liked by both women'.

Although we had never met (active)

→ This is intransitive here, so it cannot be made passive.

we were all travelling (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

I was drinking a cup of tea

The active sentence emphasises Ms Parrot and the action, rather than the cup of tea.

→ (passive) A cup of tea was being drunk by me.

This is technically possible, but it sounds strange in English, because if we are close to the action we are less likely to use a passive.

when I was summoned to solve a little mystery. (passive)

The passive emphasises the action of being summoned, rather than the person who summoned Ms Parrot.

→(active) Professor Grahamarian summoned me.

Bobby was in the lounge carriage being served a drink (passive)

In this sentence, the drink is actually the object and Bobby is the indirect object. The employee is serving the drink (the object) to Bobby (the indirect object). The active sentence is better because Bobby is the focus of the sentence and we do not need to know who is serving her a drink.

→ (passive) a drink was being served to Bobby by a railway employee

and put her pearl necklace on the table. (active)

The active sentence emphasises the fact that Bobby put her necklace on the table – the focus is on Bobby and the necklace.

→ (passive) her pearl necklace was put on the table by Bobby.

The passive does not work here because the subject of the sentence (Bobby) has already appeared in the active voice.

She went out (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

to have her nails manicured (causative verb like a passive)

The emphasis is on the action, rather than on the anonymous person who will manicure Bobby's nails.

→ (active) for somebody to manicure her nails

and closed the door (active)

The active sentence emphasises the fact that Bobby closed the door; no one else closed it, and it did not close by itself.

→ (passive) the door was closed (by her)

→ (ergative) the door closed

She was seen leaving by the famous chef Harumi Kaga.

The passive emphasises the action of being seen, rather than the person who saw her.

→ (active) Harumi Kaga saw her leave.

The train's speed increased (ergative)

The ergative verb here emphasises the action.

→ (active) The train increased speed

→ (passive) The train's speed was increased

and the necklace fell off the table. (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

Another famous singer, Bollywood star Kareena Kapadia, was also travelling on the train. (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

She proceeded to put her own pearl necklace on the table before leaving the lounge. (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

Professor Grahamarian saw her go out.

The active sentence emphasises the person who saw her.

→ (passive) She was seen going out by Professor Grahamarian.

"My necklace has vanished!" (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

cried Bobby. (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

Kareena entered (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

and looked for her necklace (active)

The active sentence emphasises Kareena and her action, rather than the necklace.

→ (passive) her necklace was looked for by Kareena.

The passive does not work here because the subject of the sentence (Kareena) has already appeared in the active voice.

she wanted (active)

→ 'want' is a stative verb, and does not work in the passive here. Many stative verbs (e.g. 'weigh') are not used in the passive, because the subject of the passive usually needs to be affected by the action of the verb. Stative verbs with indefinite agents in the passive are usually more acceptable than those with specific agents. e.g. 'She is loved by everybody', rather than 'She is loved by Jim'.

to get it cleaned (causative verb like a passive)

The emphasis is on what Kareena wanted to happen to her necklace, rather than the anonymous person who might clean it.

→ (active) someone to clean it

It too had vanished. (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

"My necklace has been stolen!" (passive)

The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Kareena thinks has stolen the necklace.

→ (active) Someone has stolen my necklace!

"What are you doing at my table?" (active)

This is a way of saying, 'Why are you here?' Bobby is not so much interested in what Kareena is doing, as in the fact that Kareena is at Bobby's table.

→ (passive) What is being done by you at my table?

“What are you doing at *my* table?” asked Kareena.

This is a way of saying, ‘Why are you here?’ Kareena is not so much interested in what Bobby is doing, as in the fact that Bobby is at Kareena’s table.

→ (passive) What is being done by you at my table?

“It’s *my* table and I’m looking for my necklace. (active)

The active is used to emphasise Bobby’s action.

→ (passive) My necklace is being looked for by me.

This sounds strange, because the closer we are to the action the less likely we are to use a passive.

It has been stolen. (passive)

The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Bobby thinks has stolen the necklace.

→ (active) Someone has stolen my necklace!

It was given to me by Prince Wolfgang,” (passive)

The passive emphasises the giving of the necklace, rather than the person who gave it.

→ (active) Prince Wolfgang gave it to me.

‘My necklace has been stolen

The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Kareena thinks has stolen the necklace.

→ (active) Someone has stolen my necklace!

and my necklace was given to me by Prince Wolfgang!’ (passive)

The passive emphasises the giving of the necklace, rather than the person who gave it.

→ (active) Prince Wolfgang gave it to me.

“He gave it to me first!” (active)

The active emphasises the action.

→ (passive) It was given to me first by him.

“My necklace has been stolen,” said Bobby.

The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Bobby thinks has stolen the necklace.

→ (active) Someone has stolen my necklace!

“Someone has taken my necklace,” (active)

The active emphasises the action rather than the end result.

→ (passive) My necklace has been taken.

‘Taken’ is a less emphatic word than ‘stolen’, so it works less well here in the passive.

Who could have stolen them?” (active)

The active emphasises the mysterious unknown person and the action, rather than the result.

→ (passive) Who could they have been stolen by?

“I think (active)

‘Think’ is a stative verb giving Bobby’s opinion, so it is active.

→ (passive) is thought by me.

This sounds strange, both because we do not usually say ‘thought by me’ and because ‘think’ is a stative verb and so it is usually used in the active.

it was someone [who is] employed by the railway,” (passive)

The passive emphasises the fact that the person is employed by the railway. We do not know his or her name. This is a shortened relative clause that leaves out the words ‘who is’.

→ (active) Someone the railway employs

“Or maybe *you have them *both!*” (active)*

‘Have’ is a stative verb, so it is active.

→ (passive) Or maybe both of them are had by you.

This sounds very strange in English because ‘have’ is a stative verb.

“I think (active)

‘Think’ is a stative verb giving Professor Grahamarian’s opinion, so it is active.

→ (passive) is thought by me.

This sounds strange, both because we do not usually say ‘thought by me’ and because ‘think’ is a stative verb and so it is usually used in the active.

we should get Ms Parrot to come and help.” (active)

The active emphasises the action.

→ (passive) Ms Parrot should be got to come and help.

This sounds very strange because the emphasis is on the action of getting Ms Parrot, and ‘get’ is used in a causative sense.

I was sitting in the library carriage (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

as I was suffering from a terrible cold. (active)

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

The hot tea quickly dissolved the sugar (active)

The active emphasises the action and the agent, which is the tea.

→ (passive) The sugar was quickly dissolved by the hot tea.

The passive emphasises the sugar.

and I was enjoying a book (active)

This is active because it has the pronoun 'I'.

→ (passive) A book was being enjoyed by me.

This sounds very strange because we do not usually use the passive when we are the one doing the action.

which discussed different people's use of the English passive. (active)

The active emphasises what the book did.

→ (passive) A book in which different people's use of the English passive was discussed.

This is possible, but there is a long distance between the subject, which is the book, and the verb 'discussed', so it is better to use the active.

But Professor Grahamarian interrupted me. (active)

The active emphasises the person (Professor Grahamarian) and his action.

→ (passive) But I was interrupted by Professor Grahamarian

your presence is required," (passive)

The passive is unusual in a sentence like this, but Professor Grahamarian is speaking in a very formal way.

→ (active) We require your presence.

It would be more normal to use the active here, and to use less formal words and say something like 'We need you'.

"What has happened?"

→ This is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive

"Someone has taken my necklace," (active)

The active emphasises the action rather than the end result.

→ (passive) My necklace has been taken.

'Taken' is a less emphatic word than 'stolen', so it works less well here in the passive.

"My necklace has been stolen!" (passive)

The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Kareena thinks has stolen the necklace.

→ (active) Someone has stolen my necklace!

"And Prince Wolfgang gave it to me!" (active)

The active emphasises the action and the person who gave the necklace.

→ (passive) It was given to me by Prince Wolfgang.

"He has stolen my necklace," (active)

The active emphasises the action and the person rather than the end result.

→ (passive) My necklace has been stolen by him.

"I have been called many things in this job, (passive)

The railway employee uses the passive to emphasise the fact that he has been accused of many things before. We do not need to know the details of the people who have previously accused him.

→ (active) People have called me many things in this job.

but I've never been called a thief!"

The railway employee uses the passive to emphasise the fact that no one has called him a thief before. We do not need to know the details of the people who might previously have accused him.

→ (active) No one has called me a thief before.

The active would be possible here, to emphasise the words 'no one', but the employee uses the passive because he used a passive earlier in the sentence.

“You should be arrested!” (passive)

The passive emphasises the action and its final result, rather than the anonymous person whom Bobby thinks should arrest the employee.

→ (active) The police should arrest you.

Because the police are usually the only ones who arrest people we do not need to include the word ‘police’ here or to make the sentence active.

“Have you looked under that napkin?” (active)

Ms Parrot uses the active because this is a direct question to a group of people.

→ (passive) Has that napkin been looked under?

“It looks as though nothing has been stolen,” (passive)

The passive emphasises the action, rather than the anonymous person Bobby and Kareen think has stolen the necklaces.

→ (active) No one has stolen anything.

“The necklaces must have dropped onto the floor (ergative)

The ergative verb here emphasises the action and the fact that no one was involved.

→ (active) You must have dropped the necklaces onto the floor

→ (passive) The necklaces must have been dropped onto the floor

The active and passive give a different meaning to the ergative. They imply that Kareena and Bobby dropped the necklaces on the floor, which is not what happened.

and got covered by that napkin. (passive with *get*)

The emphasis is on the necklaces and what happened to them, rather than what covered the necklaces.

→ (active) A napkin must have covered both necklaces

As this story shows, (active)

The active emphasises what this story does.

→ (passive) as is shown by this story; *or* as shown by this story

Note the 'as' construction without the word 'it'.

events need to be analysed very carefully (passive)

The passive emphasises events and their analysis, rather than the anonymous people who should analyse them.

→ (active) people/everyone needs to analyse events carefully

before anyone assumes the worst." (active)

The active emphasises the words 'anyone' and 'assumes'

→ (passive) before the worst is assumed.

Passives Exercise 2

Are these sentences grammatically correct? If a sentence is incorrect, can you explain why and rewrite the sentence correctly?

Example 1

The tree was vanished by the rain.

Answer: No. 'Vanished' is an intransitive verb, so it cannot be made passive. We could say *The tree vanished in the rain* or *The rain hid the tree*.

Example 2

As indicated by the chart, the temperature is rising.

Answer: Yes. *As indicated by the chart* is a linking *as*-clause.

- a. The computer was shut down by Mike's friend.
- b. The computer shut down.
- c. The coffee stained the carpet.
- d. I was laughed.
- e. Thermometers are used by doctors to measure our temperature.
- f. Thermometers measure our temperature.
- g. This exam is important for students to be passed.
- h. These problems may not associated with the failure of the system.
- i. The facts established beyond all doubt that the event really occurred.

j. The event was occurred.

k. The dog was disappeared.

l. The tree was fallen by the wind.

m. Richard was given a book.

n. The shelf was put the books on by Frank.

o. As it is shown in the table that the results vary greatly.

p. The car's speed decreased.

q. The shops close at 5 pm.

r. The experimenter conducted in 2013 was very important.

Answers to Passives Exercise 2

a. The computer was shut down by Mike's friend.

Answer: Yes. 'Shut down' is used here in the transitive, so it can be made passive.

b. The computer shut down.

Answer: Yes. 'Shut down' is an ergative verb, so it does not have to be passive.

c. The coffee stained the carpet.

Answer: Yes. Even though 'coffee' is inanimate it can be the subject of a sentence in English.

d. I was laughed.

Answer: No. 'Laugh' is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive.

e. Thermometers are used by doctors to measure our temperature.

Answer: Yes. 'Use' is a transitive verb, so it can be made passive.

f. Thermometers measure our temperature.

Answer: Yes. 'Thermometers' measure our temperature, even though they are instruments, not people.

g. This exam is important for students to be passed.

Answer: No. This should be active: *It is important for students to pass this exam*, or *This exam is important for students to pass*.

h. These problems may not associated with the failure of the system.

Answer: No. The verb 'be' is missing. The sentence should be *These problems may not be associated with the failure of the system*.

i. The facts established beyond all doubt that the event really occurred.

Answer: Yes. Even though 'facts' and 'event' are inanimate, they can still be used as the subjects of the verb.

j. The event was occurred.

Answer: No. 'Occurred' is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive. The sentence should be *The event occurred*.

k. The dog was disappeared.

Answer: No. 'Disappeared' is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive. The sentence should be *The dog disappeared*.

l. The tree was fallen by the wind.

Answer: No. 'Fall' is intransitive, so it cannot be made passive. The sentence should be *The tree fell*. If you want to include the wind as a factor, you can say *The tree fell because of the wind* or *The wind caused the tree to fall*.

m. Richard was given a book.

Answer: Yes. A recipient can appear in the passive in English.

n. The shelf was put the books on by Frank.

Answer: No. English does not usually use the passive for nouns appearing after prepositions. We could say *Frank put the books on the shelf* or *The books were put on the shelf by Frank*.

o. As it is shown in the table that the results vary greatly.

Answer: No. This is a linking *as*-clause, so it cannot take the words 'it' and 'that'.

p. The car's speed decreased.

Answer: Yes. 'Decreased' is an ergative verb.

q. The shops close at 5 pm.

Answer: Yes. 'Close' is an ergative verb.

r. The experiment conducted in 2013 was very important.

Answer: Yes. We do not need to say 'The experiment **that was** conducted in 2013' because this is a shortened relative clause.

Passives Exercise 3

These sentences are written in the active and voice, but they don't all sound good in English. Rewrite each sentence in the passive, then underline which one sounds best in English.

Example 1

Active: My mother likes chocolate.

Passive: Chocolate is liked by mother.

'Chocolate is liked by mother' doesn't sound good in the passive. It would be better to rewrite it in the active: 'My mother likes chocolate.' The sentence should therefore be written in the active voice: My mother likes chocolate.

Example 2:

Active: Someone weighed our luggage at the airport.

Passive: Our luggage was weighed at the airport.

'Our luggage was weighed at the airport' sounds better in the passive, because we do not know who weighed it. It should therefore be in the passive voice:

Our luggage was weighed at the airport.

- a. Café latte contains milk.
- b. We/The researchers heated the liquid in the test-tube and added five drops of acid.
- c. I collected my friend from the station.
- d. We/The researchers analysed the results carefully to make sure we/they had not misinterpreted them.
- e. You distribute the colour throughout the liquid.
- f. Linguists derive the word 'vindaloo' from the Portuguese 'vinho de alho'.
- g. You create the effect by adding water.
- h. Going onto prohibited land without permission constitutes trespass.
- i. Her mother gave birth to her in Australia.
- j. Everyone needs to contextualise these terms.
- k. A professional proofreader proofread Anna's thesis.

Answers to Passives Exercise 3

a. Active: Café latte contains milk.

Passive: Milk is contained in café latte.

Reason: This sentence is better in the active because 'contains' is a stative verb and is not usually used in the passive.

b. Active: We/The researchers heated the liquid in the test-tube and added five drops of acid.

Passive: The liquid was heated in the test-tube and five drops of acid were added.

Reason: The procedure is more important here than the people who conducted the experiment.

c. Active: I collected my friend from the station.

Passive: My friend was collected from the station by me.

Reason: When you are close to the action it is better to use the active.

d. Active: We/The researchers analysed the results carefully to make sure we/they had not misinterpreted them.

Passive: The results were analysed carefully to make sure they had not been misinterpreted.

Reason: We do not need to know who analysed or potentially misinterpreted the results.

e. Active: You distribute the colour throughout the liquid.

Passive: The colour is distributed throughout the liquid.

Reason: In a scientific report, the passive is often preferred. In addition, 'you' is more colloquial and is not necessary here.

f. Active: Linguists derive the word 'vindaloo' from the Portuguese 'vinho de alho'.

Passive: The word 'vindaloo' is derived from the Portuguese 'vinho de alho'.

Reason: We do not need to say 'linguists' here, because linguists work with language and it is they who commonly explain about word derivations.

g. Active: You create the effect by adding water.

Passive: The effect is created by adding water.

Reason: In a scientific report, the passive is often preferred. In addition, 'you' is more colloquial and is not necessary here.

h. Active: Going onto prohibited land without permission constitutes trespass.

Passive: Trespass is constituted if you go onto prohibited land without permission.

Reason: 'Constitute' is a stative verb and is not usually used in the passive.

i. Active: Her mother gave birth to her in Australia.

Passive: She was born in Australia.

Reason: 'to be born' is nearly always passive.

j. Active: Everyone needs to contextualise these terms.

Passive: These terms need to be contextualised.

Reason: 'Everyone' is very general, so it is better to use the passive.

k. Active: A professional proofreader proofread Anna's thesis.

Passive: Anna's thesis was proofread./Anna had her thesis proofread.

Reason: It is proofreaders who normally do proofreading, so we do not need to give the agent in the active voice. There are two passive alternatives: 'had' is a causative verb which emphasises the fact that Anna caused the action to happen. If we say, 'Anna's thesis was read by a proofreader' we do not know who asked the proofreader to read the thesis.

Passives Exercise 4

Do you need to know who the agent is? Answer 'Yes' or 'No'.

Example

This scene has often been photographed by photographers. No.

We don't need to use the words 'by photographers' because that information is not useful. If someone is taking a photo they are a photographer, even if they are not professional.

- a. Sheep are raised in New Zealand by farmers.
- b. Aphids are farmed by ants.
- c. My handbag was stolen by a thief last night.
- d. The goods were exported by exporters.
- e. The word 'voice' is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014) as 'A category used in the classification of verb forms serving to indicate the relation of the subject to the action'.
- f. X is generally conceptualised as an important way to address the issue.
- g. The damage was estimated to be extensive.
- h. This interesting feature was identified by Chinese researchers.
- i. The changing humidity was indicated by a green line in the chart, while the temperature was indicated by a red line.
- j. We need to have this plan assessed tonight.
- k. The 1812 overture was composed by Tchaikovsky.
- l. You are required by us to return the form to us in three days.

Answers to Passives Exercise 4

- a. **No.** We do not need to know the agent here ('by farmers'), as farmers are the usual people who raise sheep.
- b. **Yes.** The agent is important here because the information in this sentence is not common knowledge. Ants actually do farm aphids (a type of little insect), but we usually use the verb 'farm' for people, so in this case it is good to know that the ants are the ones doing the farming.
- c. **No.** We do not need to say 'by a thief', because we do not know who exactly stole the handbag and anyone who steals things is a thief.
- d. **No.** 'By exporters' does not add anything, because we already know that the goods were exported.
- e. **Yes.** The *Oxford English Dictionary* is not the only English dictionary, so it is useful to know where this definition comes from. In addition, if you are quoting, you should always give the source of your quotation. An alternative sentence here would be "The word 'voice' is defined as 'A category used in the classification of verb forms serving to indicate the relation of the subject to the action' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2014). This puts the emphasis on the definition rather than the dictionary.
- f. **No.** As far as we know, people (rather than animals, for example) are the only ones who conceptualise, and no specific person or group of people is mentioned here.
- g. **No.** We do not need to know who estimated the extent of the damage.
- h. **Yes.** Information about the researchers helps us to distinguish them from anyone else who may have identified the feature.
- i. **Yes.** It is important to know the function of each line, as the different colours refer to different things.
- j. **No.** We can assume that the person being spoken to will assess the plan or arrange for someone else to assess it.
- k. **Yes.** We know the overture was composed, or it would not exist. Therefore we need to give more information (e.g. who the composer was or when it was composed) to complete the sentence.
- l. **No.** It is clear that the writers are the ones who want the form to be returned, so they do not need to say 'by us'.