

Grammar – Passive Voice

When do we Use Passive Voice in English?

Active voice = The thief stole the money.

subject *verb* *object*

Passive voice = The money was stolen (by the thief.)

object *BE* *3rd form* *by* *subject (optional)*
(matches the tense) (past participle)

But when do we use passive voice?

We generally use passive voice in **formal** (not informal) and **written** (not spoken) English:

<i>when the subject is not known</i>	This stone hammer was made about 4,000 years ago.
<i>when the subject is not relevant</i>	36,000 LEGO blocks are produced every minute.
<i>when the subject is too obvious to mention</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i> was written in 1843.
<i>when the subject is people in general</i>	Christmas Day is celebrated on 25 th December.

In summary, we use passive voice when: 1. the object is more important than the subject; 2. we do not want to draw attention to the subject; 3. the subject is not known.

It could be used to describe:

- the actions of an **unknown** criminal:
The fire was started at 11 o'clock last night.
- a situation where you do not want to point the finger (apportion blame):
The plate was broken while you were out. [I'm not telling you by whom!]
- things that an **anonymous** (i.e. unimportant) mass of people do:
Chocolate has been produced at this factory since 1902.
- things that **anonymous** corporations or government departments do:
Reports have been drawn up in Whitehall regarding education reform.

Another example is of a company writing to customers to ask for money, since passive voice is more indirect and therefore more polite:

It has come to our attention that your most recent payment has not been made...

Instead of (active voice – direct): **You haven't paid us!**

We **do not** tend to use passive voice to describe:

- *everyday activities* *informal English*
- *personal relationships* *informal English*
- *perfect continuous tenses* *looks / sounds awkward, e.g.*

He has been writing **his book** all morning. > **His book** has been being written (by him) all morning.

Grammar – Passive Voice

When do we Use Passive Voice in English?

Typical contexts for passive voice:

Because of the **downplaying** / **absence** of the subject in the sentence, passive voice suits the following topics and their accompanying verbs really well. Remember that in English word order the words towards the beginning of the sentence usually have higher importance than the words towards the end:

<p>Creative arts <i>The art (object) is more important than the creator, so it gets top-billing:</i></p> <p>write direct sing play compose</p> <p>e.g. The Magic Flute was composed by Mozart.</p>	<p>Invention / discovery <i>The invention / discovery (object) is more important than the inventor / discoverer:</i></p> <p>invent discover propose attempt try</p> <p>e.g. Penicillin was discovered by Fleming.</p>
<p>Production <i>The product is more important than its producer:</i></p> <p>make produce build create turn out</p> <p>e.g. Ten bicycles are produced every hour.</p>	<p>Crime and punishment <i>It is possible that we do not know the actor:</i></p> <p>steal murder kill lock up target</p> <p>e.g. The bank was targeted in the early hours.</p>
<p>Life story of a person / obituaries <i>It is not important who aided the famous person; the focus must remain on the famous person:</i></p> <p>be born (we know by whom!) be educated (it is not important by whom) be trained (ditto) be employed (ditto) be buried (ditto)</p> <p>e.g. E. M. Forster was educated at Cambridge.</p>	<p>Historical events <i>Actions are done by a large entity or group, e.g. an army, rather than a nameable individual:</i></p> <p>discover conquer defeat elect unite</p> <p>e.g. King Harold was defeated in 1066.</p>
<p>Natural disasters <i>We know the actions were caused by nature, so it is not necessary to mention it:</i></p> <p>affect destroy kill devastate flood</p> <p>e.g. Hundreds of acres were affected by the fire.</p>	