

## An Overview of the Passive Voice in English

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Most reference grammars--traditional or transformational--have often treated passive sentences as being paraphrasable, or synonymous, or equivalent to their active counterparts. However, as Celce Murcia\* and Larsen-Freeman (1977) point out, there are some differences, not only grammatically, but also semantically, that exist between the active and the passive voice. First of all, passive and active sentences may sometimes differ in meaning--especially when they contain numerals or quantifiers--e.g. the active and passive sentences in the following two pairs are not completely synonymous:

*Everyone in the room speaks two languages (i.e. and two languages per person)*

*Two languages are spoken by every one in the room. (i.e. two specific languages that everyone speaks)*

*Few people read many books. (i.e. There are few people in this world who read lots of books.)*  
*Many books are read by few people. (i.e. There are many books that get read by very few people.)*

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\* [I am greatly indebted to Marianne Celce-Murcia for what she taught me while I was at UCLA].

Secondly, there are active voice sentences with surface structure objects that may not undergo the passive transformation. e.g.

*Mike has a car.*

*\*A car is had by Mike.*

*Roger weighs 200 pounds.*

*\*200 pounds are weighed by Roger.*

Likewise, there are passive sentences in English that have no usual active voice variants: e.g.

*John was born in India*

*\*Someone bore John in India.*

*It is rumoured that he will win the scholarship.*

*\*Someone rumours that he will win the scholarship.*

Thus it is not always the case that so-called passive and active forms of a sentence are mere variants that focus on the agent in the active and the experiencer or result in the passive.

\*Often there is a difference in meaning and with certain verbs either the active or the passive voice must be used exclusively.

### The *be* passive vs. *get* passive

There are some differences between the *be* passive and the *get* passive in modern English that grammar textbooks

often fail to mention. Let us consider the following pairs of sentences :

*John was hurt in the accident.*

*John got hurt in the accident.*

*The answer was known to all of us.*

*\*The answer got known to all of us.*

*He was invited to the party.*

*He got invited to the party.*

According to Majer (1977), the *be* passive in the first pair is formal or neutral whereas the *get* passive is colloquial and perhaps also suggests the emotional involvement of the speaker. In the second pair the *get* passive is shown to be more limited than the *be* passive in that it can only be used with actions and processes, not states. A further difference is suggested by the third pair, which is that the *get* passive may indicate some involvement on the part of the grammatical (i.e. surface) subject in bringing about the result. The *be* passive is neutral in this respect.

### When to Use the Passive

Grammar books often tell us how to *form* the passive, but not when to *use* it. In the absence of a definite usage study, the following rules of thumb (taken from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1977) may provide guidelines. You may use the passive :

a) when the agent is unknown or insignificant, and therefore not expressed.

*Oranges are grown in California.*

b) when the writer wants to emphasize the receiver or result of the action.

*Six people were killed by the tornado.*

*Quizzes are given regularly (by that professor).*

c) when the writer wants to make a statement sound objective.

*It is (assumed-believed) that he will announce his candidacy soon.*

d) when the writer wants to be tactful or evasive by not mentioning the agent.

*Margaret was given some bad advice about selecting courses.*

*Based on the total figure, it appears that an error was made in the budget.*

e) when the passive is stylistically more appropriate than the active (usually in complex sentences).

The results of this second language learning experiment tend to confirm the hypothesis that students learn in distinctively different ways as suggested by Bogen, Paivio, Cohen and Witkin.

f) when the writer wishes to mention the same grammatical subject in successive clauses.

*George Foreman beat Joe Frazier, but he was beaten by Muhammed Ali.*

### Passive vs. Agentless Sentences

One final point to make here is the differences in meaning between passive and agentless sentences. First look at the following sentences:

<i>Sentences with Agents</i>		<i>Agentless Sentences (change-of-state verbs)</i>
<i>Active</i>	<i>Passive</i>	
<i>John's brother burst the red balloon.</i>	<i>The red balloon was burst by John's brother.</i>	<i>The red balloon burst.</i>
<i>Mike opened the door.</i>	<i>The door was opened by Mike</i>	<i>The door opened.</i>
<i>Sue's behaviour last night changed Bill's opinion of her.</i>	<i>Bill's opinion of Sue was changed by her behaviour last night.</i>	<i>Bill's opinion of Sue changed.</i>

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1977) suggest that there are several situations in which agentless 'change-of-state' sentences are preferred to either active or passive sentences with agents :

- a) when the focus is on the change of state and the agent is irrelevant or very secondary :

*The store opens at 9 a.m.*

- b) when the writer or speaker's objective is to create an aura of mystery or suspense--i.e. things seem to be happening without the intervention of an agent :

*We were sitting quietly in front of the fire when suddenly the door opened.*

- c) when the subject is something so fragile or unstable (e.g. a balloon a bubble, etc.) that it can break, change,

etc., without any apparent intervention on the part of any agent :

*Left hanging on the fence, the red balloon suddenly burst and scared all of us.*

- d) when it is natural to expect change to occur (i.e. physical, social or psychological 'laws' seem to be involved) :

*Mrs. Smith's opinion of Carter changed.*

#### References

- Celce-Murcia, M & Larsen-Freeman, D. *An English Grammar for Teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language.*
- Majer, J. "The Usage of the 'get' passive vs. the 'be' passive," unpublished