

ENGLISH

93/2022

MATTERS

**PASSIVE
VOICE**



DODATEK

ENGLISH MATTERS

Passive Voice

There are two grammatical voice structures in English: active and passive. The active voice is used when you want to focus on the actor, or the person who performs an action. An example would be: *John walked his dog*. It's a short, to-the-point sentence, in which John is the main focus.

Then, there's the passive voice. It's less commonly used, but it's very important to know how and when to use it. Passive voice shifts the focus of the sentence to the action itself, or the recipients of the action. Take a look: *The dog was walked by John*. Both sentences tell us the same information, but there's something different about them, right? Let's see what's the deal is with the passive voice!

passive voice | strona bierna

to focus on sb | skupiać się na kimś

to perform sth | wykonywać coś

to-the-point | krótko i na temat

less | mniej

commonly | powszechnie

to shift sth | przesuwać coś na coś

recipient | odbiorca

Poradnik językowy jest bezpłatnym dodatkiem do English Matters nr 93/2022.

Opracowanie: Kamil Drożdżyk

Korekta: Graham Crawford

Colorful Media ul. Lednicka 23, 60-413 Poznań

tel. 61 833 63 28, redakcja@colorfulmedia.pl

Okładka: Stasia Lebedenko / Depositphotos

Forming the passive voice

Before we get into whens and whys, let's see how you form a sentence in the passive voice. It's a simple thing, really – so don't worry. The usual structure used in the active voice most often consists of a subject, verb, and an object (in that order!), as in the following sentence:

The police (subject) caught (verb) the robbers (object).

Now, let's say you want to shift the focus of this sentence to the object – in this case, the robbers. See how the process goes:

1) Move the object to the beginning.

The robbers...

2) It's time for the verb.

The robbers caught...

3) It's not right. We need a *to be* verb in-between. Since the original sentence was formed in Past Simple, *be* becomes *were*

The robbers were caught...

4) We're missing the subject from the previous sentence – the police. To make the new sentence grammatically correct, we also need to add by.

The robbers were caught by the police.

That's it! We've got ourselves a sentence using the passive voice.

The passive, however, is not exclusive to past tenses. Take a look at the examples below:

Present tense

Active voice: Internet users (S) post (V) millions of photos (O) on Instagram every day.

to consist of sth | składać się z czegoś

subject | *tu*: podmiot

object | dopełnienie

robber | włamywacz

previous | poprzedni, uprzedni

to add sth | dodać coś

exclusive to sth | wyłączny dla czegoś

Passive voice: Every day, millions of photos (O) are posted (V) on Instagram by Internet users (S).

Future Tense

Active voice: Josh (S) will finish (V) his assignment (O) tomorrow.

Passive voice: Josh's assignment (O) will be finished (V) (by him [S]) tomorrow.

Note: When forming the passive, it's sometimes optional to include the subject. In this particular example, it's pretty easy to guess that Josh himself will finish his own assignment. If you want to avoid clutter and keep your sentences concise, ditch the subject.

Summing up, to change the active voice into passive:

- reverse the SVO (subject-verb-object) structure into the OVS (object-verb-subject) structure;
- add necessary auxiliary verbs, such as is/are or was/were;
- if necessary, specify the subject by adding *by*
- remember about conjugation and changing some verbs, i.e. change *will finish* to *will be finished*, or *didn't* into *wasn't/weren't*

Be, get, have, need?

Sometimes, the passive can be formed with get, have or (rarely) need instead of be. Take a look at the examples:

I must get to the mechanic.

I should have my car repaired.

My car needs repairing.



assignment | zadanie

to include sth | włączyć coś

to avoid sth | unikać czegoś

clutter | *tu:* przeładowanie

concise | zwięzły

to ditch sth | *tu:* porzucać coś, z/rezygnować z czegoś

auxiliary ɔ:g'ziliəri | posiłkowy

When to use the passive voice

As mentioned in the introduction, the passive voice is used when we want to shift the focus of a given sentence to the person or thing which is *affected* by the action, not the person or thing who *performs* the action.

There are certain situations in which the passive voice is preferred over the active voice:

Unknown agent

When you don't know the agent (the person/thing performing the action), it's better to use the passive voice.

Examples:

- The sandwich had already been eaten when I arrived.
(Active Voice) They had already eaten the sandwich before I arrived.
- The wall was painted red and yellow.
(Active Voice) Somebody painted the wall red and yellow.

Explanation:

They and *somebody* are ambiguous terms which can refer to anybody. Therefore, there is not a clear agent present in the active voice structure, so it's better to focus on the object and what happened to it, not on the unknown agent who affected it.

Obvious agent

When the agent is obvious (i.e. can easily be guessed by the context alone), it's more fitting to go with the passive voice.

Examples:

- I was let off early today.
(Active Voice) The boss let me off early today.

sandwich 'sænwɪtʃ / 'sænwɪdʒ | kanapka
ambiguous æm'bigjuəs | dwuznaczný
therefore | dlatego
obvious 'ɒbvɪəs / 'ɑːbvɪəs | oczywisty
to let sb off | wypuścić kogoś

- The charges were dropped.

(Active Voice) The prosecutor dropped the charges.

Explanation:

In the first example, *to be let off* early is a phrase which refers to being allowed to leave work earlier than usual. It's obvious that the worker doesn't make the decision, and in most companies only the boss has the authority to allow his or her workers to clock out early. The second example is similar, as nobody other than the prosecutor can drop criminal charges.

Unimportant/general agent

In some cases, the agent is irrelevant to the overall context. When we don't have any particular person/thing in mind (i.e. when you're talking about a large group, or simply want to focus on the action), the passive voice comes in handy.

Examples:

- Over 4 million shelter animals are adopted each year in the US.

(Active Voice): Americans adopt over 4 million shelter animals each year.

- The heater is being replaced right now.

(Active Voice): Somebody is replacing the heater right now.

Explanation:

The first example talks about a large group of people. In such cases, it's more natural to use passive voice, which also emphasises the object over the subject. Similar emphasis can be seen in the second example, where the action itself is more important than the doer.

Agent known from the context

If the agent has already been mentioned, the second part of the statement can be said using the passive voice.

charges | zarzuty

dropped | uchylony

to be allowed to do sth | uzyskać pozwolenie na zrobienie czegoś

to clock out | odmeldować się, odbijać kartę

shelter animal | zwierzę ze schroniska

heater | grzejnik

replaced | zastąpiony

to emphasise sth tu 'emfəsaɪz 'sʌmθɪŋ | podkreślić coś

Examples:

- ...and then the film crew arrived. Fifteen minutes later I walked into the room and the first scene was already being filmed.

(Active Voice): ...and then the film crew arrived. Fifteen minutes later I walked into the room and the film crew was already filming the first scene.

- The police arrived and the burglar was arrested.

(Active Voice): The police arrived and arrested the burglar.

Explanation:

In both cases, the agent was revealed before. Instead of making a redundant repetition, it's better to form the second part using the passive voice.

Summing up

As you can see, it's all about the agent. The agent's role and its importance in the overall context of your statement always determine whether you should choose the passive voice or not. Use the passive voice when you:

- don't know the agent
- don't care about the agent
- already mentioned the agent
- didn't mention the agent, but it's obvious

The passive voice is, without a doubt, the less popular of the two English grammatical voices. It does not mean it's not important – quite the opposite. It's well worth knowing when to use it in your everyday life, but it's equally important to know when to refrain from using it.

First of all – the passive voice is more official and serious than the active voice. Don't use the passive voice when talking about mundane, normal things, as it's simply not fitting. For example, choose *Julia made steaks* over *Steaks were made by Julia* in your typical casual conversation.

burglar 'bɜːglə(r) / 'bɜːrglər | włamywacz

revealed | ujawniony

instead of sth | zamiast czegoś

redundant | zbędny

to refrain from sth | powstrzymać się od czegoś

mundane mʌn'deɪn | przyziemny, prozaiczny

You also shouldn't talk about yourself and your actions using passive voice – it can make you look dishonest and indirect. I love you is much more direct and contains a whole lot more emotion than *You are loved by me*.

Do not use the passive voice with intransitive verbs. Intransitive verbs, contrary to transitive ones, are verbs which don't require an object (such as arrive, come, jump, sing, run, etc.) It's logical – if there's no object, there's no way to form the passive structure. Check it for yourself and try to turn the following sentences into passive:

- The dog ran.
- The train arrived at the station.
- Jenny is dancing with Mark.

It's simply not possible, no matter what approach you take. You can twist and turn the sentence parts around, but all it does is making you sound like Yoda: To the station, the train arrived. Conclusion: don't ever try to form the passive voice with intransitive verbs.

QUOTES IN PASSIVE VOICE

“The die has been cast” – Julius Caesar

“Mistakes were made” – Bill Clinton

“I'm not allowed to use magic outside of school” – Harry Potter, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

“I heard that you're settled down” – Adele, Someone Like You

“I was made for loving you baby / You were made for loving me” – KISS, I Was Made For Lovin' You

The die has been cast | Kości zostały rzucone
to settle down | *tu*: ustatkować się, ułożyć sobie życie

dishonest | nieszczerzy

indirect | niebezpośredni

to contain sth | zawierać coś

intransitive verb | czasownik nieprzechodni

to require sth | wymagać czegoś

no matter | nieważne, bez względu na

approach | podejście

AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY 101

While it's not recommended to avoid responsibility for our actions, the passive voice allows us to do just that. The structure is especially popular among politicians, who often are very careful with what's being said. Many influential politicians, such as Bill Clinton and George Bush, used the phrase "mistakes were made" multiple times during their presidential terms. Who made these mistakes? Apparently nobody – they were just made. There's no subject to take the blame for the mistakes in question – was it the president, his party, or maybe the departments he controls? It's left unsaid. Using ambiguous and unclear language purposefully in order to deceive the listener or provide only half-truths is called doublespeak.

to allow sb to do sth | pozwalać komuś na z/robienie czegoś

apparently | najwyraźniej

to take the blame for sth | przyjmować na siebie winę za coś

purposefully 'pɜ:pəsfəli / 'pɜ:rpəsfəli | celowo

in order to | aby, żeby

to deceive sb | oszukać kogoś

to provide sth | dostarczać czegoś

doublespeak | gra półśłówek

Common mistakes and how to avoid them

You already know the basic principles of the passive voice. Now it's time to take a look at some common mistakes English students tend to make when working with passive.

Not being consistent with tenses

Sometimes, when turning an active structure into passive, it's tempting to change the tense in order to make the sentence simpler or more concise. It is, however, a mistake. You absolutely must maintain the continuity of tenses when changing the structure of a sentence.

For example, the sentence *The workers have continued working on the project*, must become *Work on the project has been continued*. If the original sentence was written or said using a particular tense (in this case, Present Perfect), the passive equivalent must be formed using the same tense.

Overusing passive voice

Now that you know how to use the passive, you're probably eager to go and try it out. It is very useful, sure, but you shouldn't overuse it. Here and there, and in the particular situations mentioned earlier it's alright, but just imagine listening to a whole story in passive. That would be tiring, wouldn't it?

Use it sparingly and always have the agent in mind. Answer these four questions: do I know the agent?; do I care about the agent?; did I already mention the agent?; is the agent obvious? If the answer to one of them is yes, then you can go ahead and form the passive.

Not being able to identify the parts of a sentence

Not every sentence is as simple as 'Mum is eating a snack'. Sometimes, it gets confusing. 'Where's the object, where's the subject' you may ask when looking at, for example, 'Right now, Jack and Timmy's mother is eating a low-fat, delicious cheese snack.' Just remember that subjects, objects and verbs can consist of more than one word. Carefully read the sentence again.

consistent | konsekwentny
to turn sth into sth | przekształcać coś w coś
tempting | kuszący
to maintain sth | zachować coś
to overuse sth | nadużywać czegoś
eager to sth | chętny do czegoś
to try sth out | wypróbować coś
sparingly | oszczędnie

snack | przekąska
to get confusing | stawać się mylącym
carefully | *tu*: dokładnie, uważnie

Who's doing the action? It's Jack and Timmy's mother – there's our subject. The action in question is eating – we've got the verb. Now, let's look for the object. It's not just the snack – it's the snack and every single adjective describing it. Yes, the object alone is made of six words here. A low-fat, delicious cheese snack is the object in this sentence.

Now, we simply turn the SVO (subject-verb-object) structure into the OVS (object-verb-subject) and voilà! Here's the sentence in passive: 'A low-fat, delicious cheese snack is being eaten by Jack and Timmy's mother right now.' Don't overthink things, the rule always stays the same: SVO becomes OVS.

PASSIVE VOICE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

While it's not recommended to use too much passive voice in your everyday life, there's one particular place where passive fits right in and is never excessive – it's academic writing. Scientific articles, theses and research studies generally refrain from using personal pronouns, so using passive seems only natural in these types of texts. For example, instead of *I conducted the research...*, in academic texts you're more likely to see *The research was conducted...*

scientific | naukowy

to refrain from sth | powstrzymać się od czegoś

personal pronoun | zaimek osobowy

instead of sth | zamiast czegoś

to conduct sth | przeprowadzać coś

Practice

■ Change the following sentences into the passive voice:

1. I will pay for the gas when we get there.

.....

2. Jack didn't steal the diamond.

.....

3. Suzy brought the cake.

.....

4. Kim found the artefact.

.....

5. Janet sends donations to Saint Pablo's hospital every month.

.....

Answer Key: 1. The gas will be paid for (by me) when we get there. 2. The diamond wasn't stolen by Jack. 3. The cake was brought by Suzy. 4. The artefact was found by Kim. 5. Donations are sent (by Janet) to Saint Pablo's hospital every month.

■ Turn the passive voice into active to reveal famous movie quotes.

1. A bigger boat is needed (by you). – *Jaws*

2. An offer he can't refuse is going to be made (by me). – *The Godfather*

3. Your milkshake is drank by me. – *There Will Be Blood*

4. Some videotapes have to be returned (by me). – *American Psycho*

5. The Declaration of Independence is going to be stolen by me. –
National Treasure

Answer Key: 1. You're gonna need a bigger boat; 2. I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse; 3. I drink your milkshake; 4. I have to return some videotapes; 5. I'm going to steal the Declaration of Independence

■ Determine the subject, verb and object in the sentences.

1. Jimmy's car is being repaired right now.

Subject:	Verb:		Object:

2. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Subject:	Verb:		Object:

3. The fire was put out by the firemen.

Subject:	Verb:		Object:

4. They've adopted a Pomeranian puppy.

Subject:	Verb:		Object:

5. Anne and Chris's friend is inviting her parents to the grand opening of the new museum.

Subject:	Verb:		Object:

Answer Key: 1. Subject: none; Verb: is being repaired Object: Jimmy's car 2. Subject: none; Verb: wasn't built; Object: Rome 3. Subject: the firemen; Verb: was put out; Object: The fire 4. Subject: They; Verb: have adopted; Object: a Pomeranian puppy 5. Subject: Anne and Chris' friend; Verb: is inviting; Object: her parents

Decide whether the passive voice was used appropriately in the examples. If the example is adequate, explain your choice with one of the rules mentioned in the 'When to use the passive voice' section.



– Where did you get those new shoes?

– My shoes were bought at Aldo.



‘The original Mona Lisa painting was stolen today from the Louvre. As of now, there aren’t any suspects.’



‘Over 60 polar bears are kept in captivity in American zoos.’



‘Then the ambulance came, and the man was taken to the hospital’.

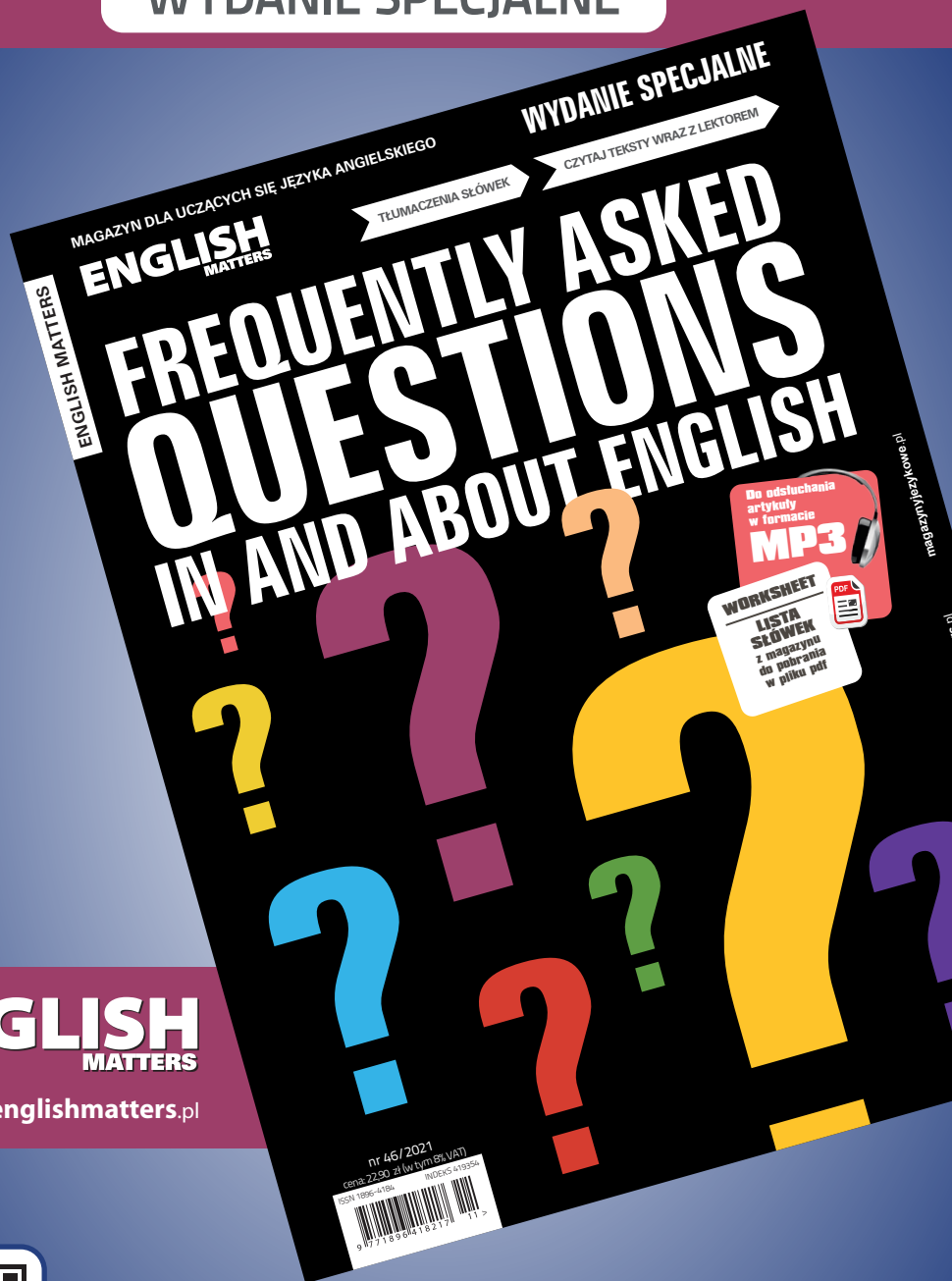


– I’m going to the store. Do you want me to get you something?

– Yes. Chocolate should be bought by you.

Answer Key: 1. Inadequate; rule: – 2. Adequate; rule: Unknown agent 3. Adequate; rule: unimportant/obvious agent 4. Adequate; rule: agent known from the context/obvious agent 5. Inadequate; rule: –

WYDANIE SPECJALNE



ENGLISH
MATTERS

englishmatters.pl



Szczegóły na kiosk.colorfulmedia.pl

Colorful
MEDIA