

Grammar Reference Unit 7

The passive

In a passive sentence, the subject is not the agent (the person or thing that does the action). The object of an active sentence becomes the subject of a passive sentence. If we want to mention the agent in a passive sentence, we use *by*.

ACTIVE: AGENT **Frank Gehry** designed OBJECT **the Guggenheim**.

PASSIVE: **The Guggenheim** was designed by AGENT **Frank Gehry**.
SUBJECT

We form the passive with the verb *be* and the past participle.

	Active	Passive
Present simple	<i>They make it here.</i>	<i>It's made here.</i>
Present continuous	<i>Sheila's making them.</i>	<i>They're being made by Sheila.</i>
Present perfect simple	<i>We haven't cooked the pasta yet.</i>	<i>The pasta hasn't been cooked yet.</i>
Past simple	<i>Marconi invented the radio.</i>	<i>The radio was invented by Marconi.</i>
Past continuous	<i>Audrey was making the costumes.</i>	<i>The costumes were being made by Audrey.</i>
Past perfect	<i>No one had done it before.</i>	<i>It had never been done before.</i>
will / be going to	<i>When will they finish the house?</i> <i>We are going to finish the project today.</i>	<i>When will the house be finished?</i> <i>The project is going to be finished today.</i>
Future perfect simple	<i>They'll have painted it by Monday.</i>	<i>It will have been painted by Monday.</i>
Modals	<i>They might move the statue to another room.</i> <i>You can see the wall from space.</i>	<i>The statue might be moved to another room.</i> <i>The wall can be seen from space.</i>

Note that we generally don't use the passive in the perfect continuous tenses. We use the active, or we express the idea in other ways.

They will be discussing the question at the meeting tonight. OR
The question will be discussed at the meeting tonight.

NOT *The question will be being discussed...*

They have been building the new museum for some years now. OR
The new museum has been under construction for some years now.

NOT *The new museum has been being built...*

Active & passive

We use the passive a lot to talk about science, technology and processes, as well as inventions, discoveries and cultural achievements.

The liquid is carbonated and flavoured before being put in bottles.
Granny Smith apples were discovered by accident in Australia in 1868.
The Sydney Opera House was designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon.

We often use the passive when we want to focus more on the action than on the agent. We do this because the agent is obvious, unimportant or unknown.

Juan was caught cheating in the test. (Obviously by the teacher)
The painting was sold for a hundred thousand pounds. (It's not important to us who sold it – just the price.)
Our front door has been painted with graffiti. (We don't know who did it.)

We often use the passive to sound more formal.

You can get tickets online. (Active, perhaps giving someone advice)

Tickets can be bought online. (Passive, perhaps written on a webpage)

We also use the passive so we can start the sentence with something known to the listener or reader and end it with something we think is surprising or new.

The drawings at the exhibition were all done by children. (I expect the word 'children' to be surprising.)

Sometimes we change from active to passive to keep the same subject for a couple of sentences.

Russell Crowe played the role of the gladiator Maximus, and was awarded an Oscar for best actor.

have / get something done

We use *have / get something done* when we arrange for someone to do something for us. *Get* is more informal than *have*. It's often used for professional services that we pay for.
I'm having my hair cut tomorrow. (by a hairdresser)
My brother's just had braces put in. (by an orthodontist)
We get our car washed every week. (at the garage)

We also use *have / get something done* when someone does something to someone else and we want to emphasize who it was done to.

Jonah got his wallet stolen yesterday. (I feel sorry for Jonah.)
Julie is going to have her photo put in a magazine. (Lucky Julie!)

Like with the passive, with *have / get something done* we can also use *by* and mention the agent.

We're having our house painted by professionals.
She had her car scratched by some local vandals.