

3.06 Active/passive verbs

The advice here concentrates on the **use** of active and passive verbs. If you are unsure about the formation of the passive, see Guide 3.2 on tense formation.

Compare the following:

ACTIVE *Oswald **shot** President Kennedy in 1963.*

PASSIVE *President Kennedy **was shot** in 1963.*

The first sentence uses an active verb because we are saying what somebody (or in other cases, something) DID: we want to say what Oswald did. In the second sentence, we are interested in what HAPPENED to Kennedy, what was done to him, so a passive verb is used.

In the first sentence, Kennedy is the object; in the second, he is the subject.

Passive verbs, therefore, are often used when *who* or *what* was responsible for an action is not important, or is implicit in what you are saying. If you are talking about a bill going through Parliament, you would simply say:

*The bill **was passed** after a deal was struck between the two parties.*

It is obvious that the bill was passed by the Members of Parliament, so we don't need to mention them.

If you do need to state the 'agent', you do so with the word *by*: *Romeo and Juliet was written by Shakespeare.*

Passive verbs are very often found in academic writing. They might be used, for example, when:

DESCRIBING PROCEDURES OR PROCESSES

*The experiment **was carried out** in very difficult conditions.*

*Patients **are referred to** a specialist after six months.*

STATING THE AIMS OF AN ESSAY OR REPORT

*The reasons for the budget deficit **will be analysed** in the final part of the report.*

*The essay **is divided** into three main sections.*

In academic writing, it is sometimes best to avoid showing too much commitment to an idea. It may be better to be a little evasive, to put some distance between yourself and your writing. Indeed, until fairly recently, most people would have advised that you should NEVER use personal language (I think; in my opinion etc) in your writing. This does seem to be changing however, and in some fields it has become more acceptable to show personal commitment and to be less evasive. This is perhaps more common in the USA than in the UK; indeed, at BCU there are many tutors who do say that personal language should always be avoided. If this is the case, then the passive is a very useful structure. For example:

*It **can be argued** that ...*

*Some students **could be described** as lazy.*

*It **is therefore suggested** that ...*

It is best, though, to avoid using the passive all the time. Aim for a variety of structures.

Passives are often used when you are referring to tables, graphs, appendices etc:

*It **can be seen** in Fig.1 that the percentage ...*

*As **is shown** in Table 3, ...*

*The full text of the letter **can be found** in Appendix 2.*

Some verbs cannot be used in the passive. 'Intransitive' verbs cannot have objects, so by definition cannot become passive, as there is no object which can become the subject. *Arrive* is an example. It can't have an object (you can't 'arrive something'), so you can't say *The bus was arrived late*.

Some 'stative' verbs - verbs which describe states rather than actions - are almost never found in the passive. Examples include lack, fit, resemble. You can't say *Sports facilities **are lacked** by the University*; you need to say *The University **lacks** sports facilities*. Not all stative verbs are like this, however: check in your dictionary if you're not sure.

The passive is perhaps more common in English than in other languages. Sentences such as:

*The road **is being repaired**.*

*I **was given** lots of lovely presents when I left.*

are normal in English, whereas a reflexive verb or an impersonal agent might be used in other languages.