

## Introducing and practicing the passive

The passive construction in English occurs in as many as 5% to 10% of the sentences, but it is frequently avoided by teachers, not so much because it is a difficult construction to learn or to teach, but more because it is a difficult construction to “explain”. This undue concern with “explaining” things is unfortunate, since it is really not necessary to explain it to our students — it is only necessary to show them how to form it and when to use it.

Happily for all of us, showing our students how to form the passive and when to use it is really quite simple — illustrating how and when it is used can be done easily, even with lower intermediate students.

The lesson on introducing and practicing the passive is in two segments. Although both segments, simultaneously illustrate how it is formed and when it is used, the first segment is in the present progressive, while the second segment is in the past tense.

Do not let the students see the picture in the student worksheet yet, but examine it yourself. The picture is a scene which features a dog, a policeman, a mugger, and a little old lady. The only new word that the students need to be taught is probably the word *mugger*.

You are going to present the scene in the picture to the students, adding one character at a time. In your head, pick out four small, moveable objects to represent each of the four characters. Alternately, draw a similar stick-figure picture on the board, again adding one character at a time.

You can begin the first segment of the lesson. Start with the little old lady. Using the object that represents the little old lady — a cup, a pencil, an eraser, or whatever, announce that it is the little old lady and then move the little old lady as if she were walking.

Ask what the little old lady is doing and elicit an answer. If you think it is useful for your class, put the questions and answers on the board as you proceed. Continue adding one character at a time. Ask about what each is doing as you add them to the scene.

Begin with the

little old lady:	What is the little old lady doing?	(She is) walking. (etc.)
Add the mugger:	What is the mugger doing?	(He is) following her. (etc.)
Add the policeman:	What is the policeman doing?	(He is) following the mugger. (etc.)
Add the dog:	What is the dog doing?	(It is) following the policeman.

Speakers typically skip the words in parentheses, at least in normal, non-classroom conversation.

This first set of questions was basically a review of the present progressive pattern.

Assuming that the students had no difficulty with the first task, introduce (or review) the passive pattern by asking about the scene you have just constructed, but now from a different point of view.

As earlier, begin your questions with the little old lady and proceed from one character to another, asking about each in turn:

What is happening to the little old lady?	She is being followed/chased/....
What is happening to the mugger?	He is being followed/chased/....
What is happening to the policeman?	He is being followed/chased/....
[What is happening to the dog?	Nothing.]

The last question is, of course, a little bit of a trick question. It is true that nothing is happening to the dog, but nonetheless at least some students will attempt to answer, using the pattern established by the first three questions in the series.

If the students are having trouble with the pattern, write out the answers on the board. Make the pattern clear by writing one answer immediately above the other, in such a way that the pattern is obvious.

The last step is to switch back and forth between the two sets of questions, producing active or passive answers depending upon the viewpoint set up by the question:

What is the mugger doing?	(He is) following the little old lady.
What is happening to the mugger?	He is being followed/chased/....
What is happening to the little old lady?	She is being chased/followed/...
What is the little old lady doing?	(She is) walking/...

If an inappropriate answer is given, simply repeat the question.

Notice that both the active and the passive are used to describe the same scene; the choice depends upon what kind of perspective on the scene has been set up by the question.

The first set of questions essentially drilled the active pattern, the second set of questions drilled the passive pattern, and the third set alternated between the two patterns.

Certainly, without too much work, it is possible to work out your own chain of events with which to illustrate the passive. All that is necessary is a string of related events, preferably involving three or four characters so that the chain is not too short.

This exercise parallels the one above, except that it uses a past tense passive, rather than a present progressive passive. Prepare for the lesson by conspicuously placing a piece of paper on the desk at the front of the class. Now, begin by giving a series of commands, each command directed to a different student. For example...

Michael, pick up the piece of paper.  
Barry, put it into a book.  
Noriko, take it out of the book.  
Kevin, fold the paper into two.  
Jim, crumple the paper into a ball.  
Catherine, drop the paper on the floor.  
Sylvia, step on the paper.  
Keiko, pick up the paper.  
Claude, throw the paper into the waste paper basket.

Now, ask the students what he or she did. Presumably, the student will answer:

Michael picked up the piece of paper.  
Barry put it into a book.  
Noriko took it out of the book.  
Kevin folded the paper into two.  
Jim crumpled the paper into a ball.  
Catherine dropped the paper on the floor.  
Sylvia stepped on the paper.  
Keiko picked the paper up.  
Claude threw the paper into the waste paper basket.

These answers are, of course, all past tense and active voice. Now, ask what happened to the paper.

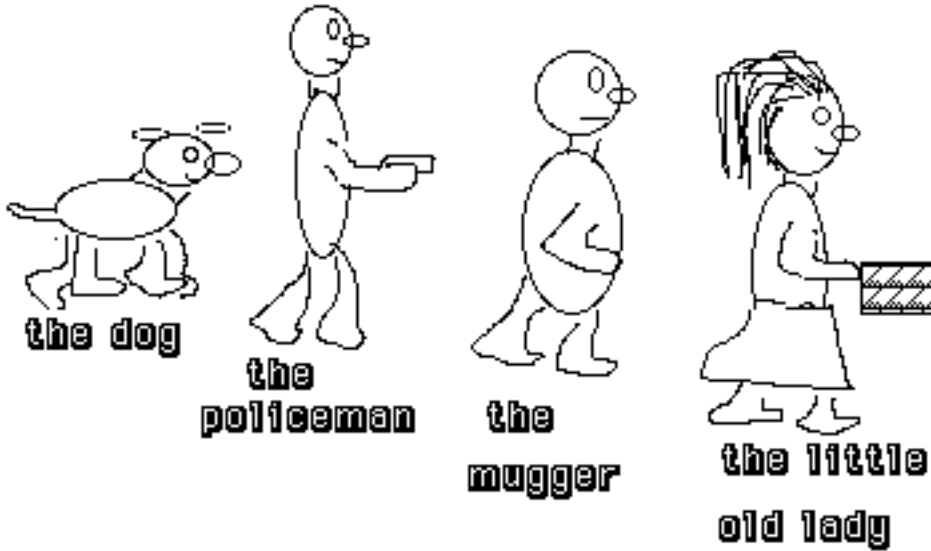
It was picked up.  
It was put into a book.  
It was folded into two.  
It was ...

That is, the switch of focus to the paper produces a series of sentences in the passive voice.

Throughout this exercise, we have carefully avoided using the agent phrase — phrases like “by the man,” “by Michael,” and so on. It is better to teach the English passive without the agent phrase, introducing it only later when the students have mastered passive verb forms.

**Student Worksheet:**

Examine the picture and then answer the questions.



**Part I:**

- What is the little old lady doing?      She is walking
- What is the mugger doing?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the policeman doing?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the dog doing?      \_\_\_\_\_

**Part II:**

- What is happening to the little old lady?      She is being followed....
- What is happening to the mugger?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is happening to the policeman?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is happening to the dog?      \_\_\_\_\_

**Part III:**

- What is the mugger doing?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is happening to the mugger?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is happening to the little old lady?      \_\_\_\_\_
- What is the little old lady doing?      \_\_\_\_\_