CHAPTER 8

The passive

Passive voice

English has two voices: active voice and passive voice. In impressionistic terms, in the active voice the subject of the sentence is active; in the passive voice the subject of the sentence is passive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active voice</th>
<th>Passive voice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill shot John.</td>
<td>Sam was shot.</td>
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Notice that both the active and the passive verbs are in the past tense; thus, the difference between the two verbs is not one of tense. Certainly, Bill in the first sentence is active in an obvious sense, just as Sam in the second sentence is passive.

In grammatical terms, the difference between active and passive verbs is that a passive verb form contains two pieces that its active counterpart does not: it contains an additional form of the verb be that is followed by a past participle.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Active voice</th>
<th>Passive voice</th>
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<td>shot</td>
<td>was shot</td>
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<tr>
<td>= past + shoot</td>
<td>= past + be shoot (past participle)</td>
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Compare the active and the passive versions of the verbs in our example sentences. Notice that in both cases the verb is past tense, but in the passive voice the verb has a be plus a past participle that its active counterpart lacks.
active:                                      passive:
1. Marcel *cooks* spicy food...          Spicy food *is cooked*...  
2. Marcel *cooked* the meal...            The meal *was cooked*...    
3. Marcel *will cook* the meal...         The meal *will be cooked*...  
4. Marcel *has cooked* ...                Curries *have been cooked*...  
5. Marcel *had cooked* ...                Curries *had been cooked*...  
6. Marcel *will have cooked*...           Curries *will have been cooked*...  
7. Someone in this class *is taking* ...  Notes *are being taken*...  
8. Someone in this class *was taking* ... Notes *were being taken*...  
9. Someone in this class *will be taking*... Notes *will be being taken*...  
10. Jim *has been studying* ...           It *has been being studied*..  
11. Jim *had been studying* ...           It *had been being studied*..  
12. Jim *will have been studying*...      It *will have been being studied*...  

[Note: Several of the examples seem awkward. In part, these are awkward because such examples never occur in isolation, but instead occur only in the midst of particular contexts. In any case, they do demonstrate the pattern.]

**Exercise 7.1: Labelling Passives**

Give the tense-aspect label of the italicized verbs, and then indicate which are in the passive voice.

Napoleon (1) *approved* of this poem and (2) *caused* it (3) *to be inscribed* on the wall of the big barn, at the opposite end from the Seven Commandments. It (4) *was surmounted* by a portrait of Napoleon, in profile, executed by Squealer in white paint.

1. _____________________  3. ____________________________  
2. _____________________  4. ____________________________  

Meanwhile, through the agency of Whymper, Napoleon (1) **was engaged** in complicated negotiations with Frederick and Pilkington. The pile of timber (2) **was** still unsold. Of the two, Frederick (3) **was** still the more anxious to get hold of it, but he would not offer a reasonable price. At the same time there (4) **were** renewed rumours that Frederick and his men (5) **were plotting** to attack Animal Farm and to destroy the windmill, the building of which (6) **had aroused** furious jealousy in him. Snowball (7) **was known** to be still skulking on Pinchfield Farm. In the middle of the summer the animals (8) **were alarmed** to hear that three hens (9) **had come forward** and confessed that, inspired by Snowball, they (10) **had entered** into a plot to murder Napoleon. They (11) **were executed** immediately, and fresh precautions for Napoleon's safety (12) **were taken**. Four dogs guarded his bed at night, one at each corner, and a young pig named Pinkeye (13) **was given** the task of tasting all his food before he (14) **ate** it, lest it should be poisoned.

1. _____________________ 8. ____________________________
2. _____________________ 9. ____________________________
3. _____________________ 10. ____________________________
4. _____________________ 11. ____________________________
5. _____________________ 12. ____________________________
6. _____________________ 13. ____________________________
7. _____________________ 14. ____________________________

Note 1: The verbs which are not italicized should be ignored. Note 2: Several of the examples are not finite—that is, cannot be labelled past, present, or future—but can be labelled as perfect, progressive, or passive, as the case may be. These non-finite forms are labelled as such in the answers to this exercise found after Exercise 2.
EXERCISE 7.2: LABELLING PASSIVES

Give the tense-aspect label of the italicized verbs, and then indicate which are in the passive voice. Note: The verbs which are not italicized should be ignored. Answers to the first twenty-four questions can be found in the answer section.

At about the same time it (1) was given out that Napoleon (2) had arranged to sell the pile of timber to Mr. Pilkington; he (3) was also going to enter into a regular agreement for the exchange of certain products between Animal Farm and Foxwood. The relations between Napoleon and Pilkington, though they (4) were only conducted through Whymper, (5) were now almost friendly. The animals (6) distrusted Pilkington, as a human being, but greatly (7) preferred him to Frederick, whom they both (8) feared and (9) hated. As the summer (10) wore on, and the windmill (11) neared completion, the rumours of an impending treacherous attack (12) grew stronger and stronger. Frederick, it (13) was said, (14) intended to bring against them twenty men all armed with guns, and he (15) had already bribed the magistrates and police, so that if he could once get hold of the title deeds of Animal Farm they would ask no questions. Moreover, terrible stories (16) were leaking out from Pinchfield about the cruelties that Frederick practised upon his animals. He (17) had flogged an old horse to death, he (18) starved his cows, he (19) amused himself in the evenings by making cocks fight with splinters of razor-blade tied to their spurs. The animals' blood (20) boiled with rage when they heard of these things (21) being done to their comrades, and sometimes they (22) clamored (23) to be allowed to go out in a body and attack Pinchfield Farm, drive out the humans, and set the animals free. But Squealer (24) counselled them to avoid rash actions and trust in Comrade Napoleon's strategy.

1. _____________________ 13. ____________________________
2. _____________________ 14. ____________________________
3. _____________________ 15. ____________________________
4. _____________________ 16. ____________________________
5. _____________________ 17. ____________________________
Nevertheless, feeling against Frederick (1) continued to run high. One Sunday morning Napoleon (2) appeared in the barn and (3) explained that he (4) had never at any time contemplated selling the pile of timber to Frederick; he (5) considered it beneath his dignity, he (6) said, to have dealings with scoundrels of that description. The pigeons who (7) were still sent out to spread tidings of the Rebellion (8) were forbidden to set forth anywhere on Foxwood, and (9) were also ordered to drop their former slogan of “Death to Humanity” in favour of “Death to Frederick”. In the late summer yet another of Snowball's machinations (10) was laid bare. The wheat crop (11) was full of weeds and it (12) was discovered that on one of his nocturnal visits Snowball (13) had mixed weed seeds with the seed corn. A gander who had been privy to the plot (14) had confessed his guilt to Squealer and immediately committed suicide by swallowing deadly nightshade berries. The animals now also (15) learned that Snowball (16) had never—as many of them (17) had believed hitherto—received the order of “Animal Hero, First Class”. This (18) was merely a legend which (19) had been spread some time after the Battle of the Cowshed by Snowball himself. So far from (20) being decorated, he had been censured for showing cowardice in the battle. Once again some of the animals (21) heard this with a certain bewilderment, but Squealer was soon able to convince them that their memories (22) had been at fault.

1. Notice that the full verb is had received.
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Chapter 7: The use of the passive

The use of the passive

Here are three examples of how the passive is used and, by extension, of how to teach it.

1. “The mugger”

   Much of the current controversy about whether or not teachers should plan their lessons around grammar points seems to me to miss the point: it is not how the teachers see the lesson but how the students see the lesson that is crucial. And, from a learner's viewpoint, what is crucial is that the learners view the lesson as starting from meaning. As professional language teachers, it may be clear to us that a lesson is motivated by grammatical considerations, but to be effective the learners must see the lesson as starting from meaning.

   This notion can be illustrated by an examination of the scene below which features a dog, a policeman, a mugger, and a little old lady. Normally, cuisenaire rods are used for each of the characters, but here a line drawing is being used in place of the rods. The students can be expected to know all the words, with the possible exception of the word *mugger*. If your students live in one of our larger urban centers, they have learned the word *mugger* already; if they do not live in an urban center but it is already the second or third week of the semester, you undoubtedly will have a ‘favorite’ student who can help in your demonstration of the word *mugger* (with you playing the mugger).
The lesson begins with the teacher asking a series of questions, cuing the answers by making the action sequence clear:

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

Notice that in answering these questions, it is normal for a speaker to skip the material in parentheses. If the students have trouble at this point, you have made an error in judgement and the rest of the lesson should be aborted.

However, if the students are not yet having trouble, continue with similar line of questions but now from a slightly different perspective:

- 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.

Two things should be noted about the above answers. First, while the first series of answers were active, the shift in perspective for the second series of questions has produced a series of answers in the passive. Second, the *by*—phrase (by the mugger, by the policeman, and so on) is typically missing not just in these answers but also in normal English discourse. If the students are having trouble with the form, the answers can be written on the board one above another to help them out.

The last step is to switch back and forth between the two series of questions, producing active or passive answers depending upon the perspective taken in 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/….
Chapter 7: The use of the passive

If an inappropriate answer is given, simply repeat the question. The connection between the scene and the language used is interesting. The scene remains the same; the alternation between the active and the passive depends upon how we are viewing the scene, that is, on whose perspective we are taking.

This teaching segment can be criticized on various grounds: while it is meaningful, it is certainly not communicative; it is unquestionably teacher-centered; in at least some senses, it is a disguised drill; and so on. There are other senses, however, in which the segment illustrates a number of useful principles. (a) The segment begins with meaning; then, the language to be learned is developed from it. (b) From a student viewpoint, the task involves how to express certain meanings, not how to use the passive. (c) The segment involves teaching through examples and illustrations, not through explanations. In fact, the segment does not involve the use of either grammatical explanations nor terms.

Further notes on the passive. 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. Two excellent pieces of material for teaching the passive are also found in Ronald White's article “Teaching the passive”; part of one of these is adapted here for you.

1. In a more technical discussion, I would be using the terms backgrounded versus foregrounded in place of old versus new, because in a very real sense it is not so much the absolute newness or oldness of the information but more the contrast between what has already been communicated in the conversation (or text) versus what is still in the process of being communicated.

2. The temptation to have students do exercises in which they change active sentences into passive sentences and vice versa should be avoided. These exercises ignore the function of the active-passive distinction, the arrangement of background and new information. As a result, even those students who master the techniques of changing one form into another seldom understand when to use the passive.
2. "Processing Milk" (Ronald White)

Ronald White's article on the passive recommends teaching the passive in the context of describing a process. The reason is clear: in a process the focus is typically on the patient or object of the action (in this case, the milk) rather than on the agent or doer of the action (in this case, the various people involved in the process).
Outside of such descriptions of processes, I cannot think of another instance in which there are such naturally-occurring long strings of passive sentences.


3. "How fish is canned" (also from Ronald White)

For 11, 12, 13, or 14 students.

Fish is delivered to a cannery.

A First, the fish is cleaned
B and then it is washed.

AB First, the fish is cleaned and then it is washed.
A Next, it is drained
B and then it is soaked in brine.

AB Next, it is drained and then it is soaked in brine.
A Next cans are filled with fish
B and then liquid is added to the cans.

AB Next cans are filled with fish and then liquid is added to the cans.
A After this the cans are cooled
B and then they are packed into cartons.

AB After this the cans are cooled and then they are packed into cartons.
After this, it is washed again.
Right after the second washing, it is weighed.
Then the tops are attached to the cans
and then the full cans are sterilized.

Finally, the cartons are stored in a warehouse.

4. "Hit your neighbor"

A final example of a string of related events is the chain drill I affectionately refer to as “Hit your neighbor”. Not only does this drill help teach the passive, but it also promotes student interaction. All that is necessary is series of imperatives such as:

To Adam: Duane, hit Yuri on the arm.
To Yuri: Yuri, hit Ela on the hand.
To Ela: Ela, touch Duane on the shoulder.
To Duane: Duane, hit Chen on the back.

Now that we have a chain of events, we can ask such questions as ‘What did Duane do?’ and ‘What happened to Duane?’ That is, we can run our passive drill.

The ‘meaning’ of the passive

The ‘meaning’ of the passive has been left until last for two reasons: First, it strikes me that what our students need to learn is where and when to use the passive, rather than what it ‘means’. In fact, knowing something about what it means probably will not particularly help them use it. Second, although illustrating how to use the passive seems relatively simple to me, explaining its meaning is not. And, in any case, irrelevant to ESL teaching. The meaning is, however, interesting in terms of our understanding of the nature of language in general and of English in particular.

One of the most basic organizing principles of English grammar is the strong preference for beginning the sentence with already-known background information and ending it with the less-known, newer information, that is, the preference for the old before the new. The distinc-
tion between the active and passive is but one of many devices English uses to maintain this old-new order.

As you might recall from “The mugger” story, this scene can be described both in the active voice and in the passive voice. That is, the policeman can be mentioned first (as in sentence (a)), or the mugger can be mentioned first (as in sentence (b)).

a. The policeman is following the mugger.
   b. The mugger is being followed by a policeman.

This is misleading, though. We do not have a free choice; most of our apparent choice depends what is background and what is new. For example, it is clear that as an answer to the question ‘What is the policeman doing?’ some ways of describing the scene are much better than others:

What is the policeman doing?
   a. The mugger is being followed by him.
   b. The policeman is following the mugger.
   c. He is following the mugger.
   d. Following the mugger.

Sentence (a), an answer in the passive voice, is unquestionably the least acceptable. Why? It is informationally backwards: the question establishes the policeman as old information, so he should be mentioned first, while the mugger is new, added information, so he should be mentioned second. In addition, sentence (a) includes an informationally-useless phrase by him: since the policeman was already mentioned in the question, the him in by him.
Sentence (b) is immeasurably better than sentence (a)—the background information occurs before the newer information. The sentence is still somewhat awkward, however, because of the noun phrase the policeman. Since the policeman is already known from the question, it would be more natural to refer to him with the pronoun he.

Sentence (c) is quite natural. The old information not only comes first but is marked as old information by the use of he, and the new information comes toward the end.

Sentence (d) is also quite natural. The old information—the policeman or he—is treated as so obvious that it is dropped entirely. Only information not already given in the question is provided, that is, only the new information is provided.

Notice that if we change the preceding question to ‘What is happening to the mugger?’ the answers change:

What is happening to the mugger?

a. A policeman is following the mugger.
b. He is being followed by a policeman.
c. He is being followed.
Sentence (a) is a quite unnatural answer. The arrangement of new and background information is backwards. *The mugger*—which is background information both because of its mention in the question and because of the article *the*—comes last, while *a policeman*—which is marked as new information by the article *a*—comes first.

Sentence (b) and (c) are both informationally correct—the old precedes the new.

In short, the difference between the active and passive functions to place background information—what we are talking about—at the beginning of sentences and newer, foregrounded information—what we are saying about it—at the end.

**Teaching implications**

The teaching implications of this little digression on the meaning of the passive are transparent. Although the meaning can be explained in terms of the interaction between new and old information (and, in part, in terms of the tendency of the agent to precede the patient), such explanations are not likely to be as effective in teaching the use of the passive as are clear illustrations.

Through the use of illustrations and teaching based on contextualized texts such as ‘The mugger’ or ‘Canning Fish’ the active and the passive can be taught as two separate patterns, one pattern used under one set of conditions, the other used under another.

**Terms**

To check yourself, see if you can briefly describe each of the following terms and illustrate it in a phrase or sentence (underlining the relevant part).

voice:
- active
- passive
## Answers to Exercise 7.1:

1. past  
2. past  
3. infinitive (passive)  
4. past (passive)  
5. past (passive)  
6. past  
7. past (passive)  
8. past (passive)  
9. past perfect  
10. past perfect  
11. past (passive)  
12. past (passive)  
13. past (passive)  
14. past

## Answers to Exercise 7.2:

1. past (passive)  
2. past perfect  
3. past progressive  
4. past (passive)  
5. past  
6. past  
7. past  
8. past  
9. past  
10. past  
11. past  
12. past  
13. past (passive)  
14. past  
15. past perfect  
16. past progressive  
17. past perfect  
18. past  
19. past  
20. past  
21. non-finite (passive)  
22. past  
23. infinitive (passive)  
24. past  

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1. past  
2. past  
3. past perfect  
4. past  
5. past  
6. past  
7. past (passive)  
8. past (passive)  
9. past perfect  
10. past perfect  
11. past perfect  
12. past (passive)  
13. past perfect  
14. past  
15. past  
16. past perfect  
17. past perfect  
18. past
Chapter 7: Terms

8. past (passive) 19. past perfect (passive)
9. past (passive) 20. nonfinite (passive)
10. past (passive) 21. past
11. past 22. past perfect

[More verb labelling exercises are found in Chapter 8]