
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Present and past passives



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar. I'm Neil...

Rob

And I'm Rob. Hello.

Neil

Today we're talking about the passive voice.

Rob

Yes, the passive voice. In English, we can talk about things in both the active and passive voice.

Neil

Yes. And we're going to start with the active voice. And here's Mike with our first example.

Mike

Pharrell Williams sang the song Happy.

Neil

And one more time.

Mike

Pharrell Williams sang the song Happy.

Neil

Pharrell Williams sang the song Happy. Good song Rob, isn't it.

Rob

Well it makes me happy anyway.

Neil

And in grammatical terms, we've got the **subject** – **Pharrell Williams**, then the **verb**, **sang**, then the **object** of the verb – **the song Happy**. And that is an example of the active

voice because the **performer of the action**, the **doer**, is at the beginning of the sentence - Pharrell. We're focusing on the person or the thing that **does** the action of the verb.

Rob

So far so good – but what if we want to focus on what receives the action? That's the object in the active sentence. What if we're more interested in the song than we are in the singer? Can we put **the song Happy** at the beginning of the sentence?

Neil

Well yes, we can, but the grammar needs to change. Listen carefully:

Mike

The song Happy was sung by Pharrell Williams.

Neil

Again.

Mike

The song Happy was sung by Pharrell Williams.

Neil

So now the receiver of the action – **The song Happy** – comes first. It changes place with the doer. And because we've changed the sentence structure, we need to make two changes to the sentence. First, we need to add the verb **to be**, in the correct form. Second, we have to use the **past participle** of the verb.

Rob

And that gives us a sentence in the passive voice:

Mike

The song Happy was sung by Pharrell Williams.

Neil

Let's listen to those two sentences one more time. **Active voice:**

Mike

Pharrell Williams sang the song Happy.

Neil

And **passive voice:**

Mike

The song Happy was sung by Pharrell Williams.

Rob

Thanks Mike. And the two sentences have exactly the same meaning, don't they, Neil?

Neil

They do. They have exactly the same meaning. So you might be wondering why we need two different ways of saying the same thing.

Rob

I was wondering... But, the good thing about passive sentences is that we can give the receiver of the action more importance in our sentence by putting it at the start, but that's not the only reason that the passive voice is useful, right Neil?

Neil

Right! The passive voice is really useful when we don't know who or what performed the action – or if everyone knows it. So we don't need to say it. Can we have an example please, Mike...

Mike

Millions of cars were sold in 2012.

Neil

And one more time.

Mike

Millions of cars were sold in 2012.

Neil

So that's a passive sentence with **millions of cars** at the start. Then we've got the verb **to be** plus the past participle – **were sold** – and then for the doer of the action – well, there is no doer.

Rob

What's that? No doer of the action at all... sound strange? Well, actually, we don't have to have a doer in a passive sentence, so, if the doer is not really important, or if it's obvious, we can leave it out. We know that some people bought all these millions of cars. But we don't have to say it.

Neil

Yeah. So we leave the performer of the action out if it's not important or if everybody knows.

Rob

Right. You can also leave the doer out if you **don't** know it, like this:

Mike

My bicycle was stolen last weekend.

Neil

Oh, Mike!

Rob

Poor Mike.

IDENT

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Rob

And we're talking about the passive voice. Now to make tenses in the passive voice, we change the form of the verb **to be**. Here's a present tense example:

Mike

Millions of songs are downloaded every day.

Neil

Again.

Mike

Millions of songs are downloaded every day.

Neil

And a past tense example:

Mike

15 million songs were downloaded yesterday.

Rob

And now – it's time for a quiz. Change these sentences from active into passive, and remember, you might not need a doer. Number one: People speak Spanish in Cuba and Chile.

Neil

And the answer is: **Spanish is spoken in Cuba and Chile.** Number two: The police arrested ten people last night.

Rob

And the answer is: **Ten people were arrested last night.** OK, last one: Brazil won the 1994 World Cup.

Neil

Ah, I remember it well! **The 1994 World Cup was won by Brazil.** And the doer – Brazil – is important here, isn't it Rob?

Rob

Yes it is, very important.

Neil

So we don't leave it out.

Rob

Well done if you got all those right. So that's the passive voice. We use it to give importance to the receiver of the action of a verb, or when we don't know who did it or everyone knows it.

Neil

There's more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

Both

Bye!