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Grammar Reference

Use of the passive

The **passive** is used to describe an event **happening to the subject**.

- The passive verb can be followed by an **agent** introduced by '**by**'. This is, in fact, the subject of the active sentence.

Example:

The thief **was caught by** the police.

(Active sentence: The police caught the thief.)

- Some verbs in the passive are **never** followed by an agent, such as **to be born** and **to be left**.

Note. The **subject** of the **passive sentence** is in general the **direct** object in the active sentence.

Example:

Passive sentence: **The painting was signed** by Dalí.

(Active sentence: Dalí **signed the painting**.)

However, the **indirect** object of an active sentence can also become the **subject** in the **passive**.

Example:

Passive sentence: **She was told** the truth.

(Active sentence: Somebody **told her** the truth.)

- The **agent** introduced by '**by**' can be an **indirect interrogative** (or exclamatory) **clause**.

Example:

I'm amazed by how clever you are.
agent

The impersonal structure

An **impersonal structure**, used to talk about **people in general**, is constructed as follows:

A - The **passive form without the agent**. This is only possible if the active sentence contains a direct object.

Example:

The castle **was built** in 1478.

(Active sentence: **Somebody** built the castle in 1478.)

We **are expected** at 7 o'clock.

(Active sentence: **Someone** expects us at 7 o'clock.)

B - The personal pronouns **we, you, they**.

- **We** when the **speaker** is **included** in the group of people in question.

Example:

We drive on the left side of the road.

(In this case, the speaker is British.)

- **You** when the **listener** is **included** in the group of people in question, but the speaker, in general, isn't.

Example:

You drink a lot of tea in Britain.

(In this case, the listener is British.)

- **They** when **neither the speaker nor listener** are included in the group of people in question.

Example:

They are very friendly in Ireland.

C - **People** (plural meaning), **somebody** / **someone** (singular meaning).

Example:

People think he's funny.

Someone's on the phone for you.

D - The indefinite pronoun **one** in **proverbs** or other expressions of that type.

Example:

One never knows.

(More familiar: **You** never know.)

E - **There is** + **noun with a verbal meaning**

Example:

There is a **knock** at the door.