

OVERVIEW OF PASSIVE SENTENCES: MEANING AND USE

Here are the basic reasons for choosing a passive sentence instead of an active sentence:

1. The passive is used when the agent is unimportant or not known, and the sentence emphasizes the action, process, or result instead. The agent is commonly omitted from passive sentences, especially in factual writing found in scientific articles and in journalism:

Scientific article:

Smart-phones were developed in order to solve complex problems quickly.
(The agent is unimportant. The sentence emphasizes the result.)

News Report:

Five people were killed by a mudslide yesterday afternoon.
(The result is emphasized more than the agent.)

Headline:

TWO HOMES ROBBED (The agent is unknown. The result is important.)

2. The passive is preferred when it's not important to mention the agent because the agent is obvious from the meaning of the sentence:

My mail **is delivered** at noon. (It's clear that a postal carrier delivers it.)

Definition:

Paella is a Spanish dish that **is made** with seafood. (It's obvious that people make paella.)

3. The passive is used to make a sentence sound more impersonal. It is common in formal announcements, rules, and signs, and especially when you don't want to mention the agent:

Airline announcement:

Passengers **are not permitted** to smoke on the aircraft. (The passive is more impersonal than *We do not permit you to...*)

Registration information:

All fees **must be paid** are the time of registration. (The passive is more impersonal than *You must pay all fees at the time of registration.*)

A boss speaking to her employees:

A serious error **was made** in this week's payroll. (The boss intentionally doesn't say who made the mistake.)

4. A passive sentence without an agent is often used instead of an active sentence that has a very general subject such as **people, someone, somebody**, or impersonal **you** and **they**:

A sign:

SPANISH IS SPOKEN HERE.

(Active sentence: People **speak Spanish** here.)

An opinion:

I think the health department **should be called** immediately.

(Active sentence: I think somebody **should call** the health department soon.)

5. The passive is often used to keep focus on a noun that was mentioned in a prior sentence. The noun is old information, and old information is usually found in a subject position in a sentence:

Jenna had four job interviews. Eventually **she was hired** by a new computer company in Dallas. In her last email, she said she was very happy there.

(This discussion is about Jenna. The passive is used so that Jenna can be the subject of the second sentence.)

Yesterday, the old woman lost her **purse**. **It was found** by a mailman a few hours later.

(The discussion is about a purse. The passive is used so that the purse can be the subject of the second sentence.)