

Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful
Mini Lesson #9
Passive Voice: It's All About Subjects and Verbs

The **purpose** of this lesson is to present a new way that **Passive Voice** can be understood and presented to English language learners.

Passive Voice refers to a sentence type in which the actor, performer or executor of an action verb is not the subject of the sentence. In **Passive Voice** sentences, the subject is typically the **recipient** or **receiver** of the action of the verb. The following sentences illustrate **Passive Voice** in 3 different tenses: Simple Present Tense, Simple Past Tense and Present Continuing Tense.

The **assignment is given** every semester.
The **papers were submitted** for grading last week.
Currently, **they are being read** and **evaluated**.

Notice in these three sentences, the focus is on 'the assignment'. Who made the assignment, who submitted the assignment, and who is scoring the assignments are not mentioned. The three following sentences provide that information:

The **instructor gives** the assignment every year.
The **students submitted** their papers last week.
The **instructor is reading** and **evaluating** them now.

These sentences focus on the **doers** or **agents** of the actions described in the sentences. They are **Active Voice** sentences.

Frequently **Passive Voice** is taught by providing the learner with an **Active Voice** sentence and instructing the learner how to reverse the order of the subject (agent) and object (recipient) of the action in the resulting **Passive Voice** sentence. Such a process is cumbersome; the active voice subject becomes a prepositional phrase, and the active voice object becomes the passive voice subject. This process is also not reflective of the mental process when one actually makes statements using **Passive Voice**.

A much more direct and meaningful instructional approach to presenting **Passive Voice** to language learners is to have them focus on the **Subject-Verb Combinations** as they relate to the

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action of a particular verb. When the Subject **receives** the action of the verb, the sentence is **Passive Voice**. When the subject **does** the action of the verb, the sentence is **Active Voice**.

Using this approach, the learner can be given a verb and asked to construct short sentences combining various subjects with the verb. For example, learners can be given the verb 'DRIVE' and asked two questions:

What are things that are driven?

Cars are driven
Trucks are driven.
Taxis are driven.

Who are people who drive?

Chauffeurs drive.
Truck drivers drive.
My uncle drives a Taxi.

This kind of activity enables the learner to contrast Passive and Active Voices using short, realistic sentences that reflect how they would be used in actual conversations. Other verbs that could be used with this approach are 'eat' 'drink', 'read', 'write', 'break', 'hit' and many more.

A related English feature which can be taught using the same approach is the distinction between verbs used as adjectives with 'ED' endings, and verbs used as adjectives with 'ING' endings. This is illustrated with these two sentences.

The man is bored.

The man is boring.

The distinction between 'bored' and 'boring' in these two sentences is similar to the Passive-Active distinction described above. If the man is 'bored', he is receiving the boredom. If the man is 'boring', he is causing other people to be bored. 'Bored' is like a **Passive Adjective**, and 'boring' is like an **Active Adjective**.