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Passive voice

The passive voice puts the action or the receiver of the action first: The bridge was built in 1890. Form it with be + past participle. Use it when the doer is unknown or unimportant, and for processes in IELTS Writing Task 1, where the steps matter more than who does them.

What to know

Active and passive: what changes

In an **active** sentence the subject does the action: Workers cut the trees. In a **passive** sentence the object of the active sentence becomes the subject: The trees are cut. The doer (workers) can be added with **by**, or left out.

How to form the passive

The pattern is **be + past participle**. The verb be changes to match the tense; the main verb stays as a past participle (made, built, collected).

- present simple: Glass is recycled in many countries.
- past simple: The museum was opened in 2010.
- present perfect: Several new roads have been built.
- will: The results will be announced on Friday.
- modals: Waste can be reused. Plastic should be banned.

When to use the passive

Use the passive in four main situations. First, when the doer is unknown: My bike was stolen. Second, when the doer is not important: English is spoken in many countries. Third, when the doer is obvious: The thief was arrested (by the police is not needed). Fourth, when you want a formal, impersonal tone: It is believed that young people spend more time online.

The passive in Task 1 process diagrams

In IELTS Writing Task 1, a process diagram shows steps in the production of something such as cement, glass or electricity. The steps are important, and the workers or machines are not, so the passive is the natural choice.

Choosing the tense in a process description

Most process diagrams show a regular, repeated process, so use the present simple passive throughout: The grapes are picked and then they are pressed. If the diagram shows a process that took place at a particular time in the past, use the past simple passive instead. Keep the same tense from beginning to end, because a change halfway makes the answer harder to follow.

Exercises

1. In the first stage, the milk _____ before it is bottled.
 - a. heated

b. is heated

c. heating

2. The bridge _____ in 1890.

a. was built

b. built

c. was build

3. Plastic bottles _____ and then melted down.

a. are collecting

b. are collected

c. collect

4. The accident _____ at midnight.

a. was happened

b. was happen

c. happened

5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The glass (2) is crushed (3) and then (4) wash.

6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The new library (2) was build (3) in the city centre (4) last year.

7. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): are / cut / and / a / trees / The / by / down / factory. / to / transported

8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): published / last / month. / report / by / The / was

9. Correct this: *The water is heat until it boils.*

10. Correct this: *The results was announced yesterday.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/passive-voice/practice/

IELTS tip. Task 1 process diagrams are a gift for the passive. Describe each stage with a clear passive verb, link them with sequence words, and keep the same tense throughout. In Task 2, use the passive for general statements, such as It is widely believed that, and keep the active for your own opinion.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Passive voice

AIM	Learners form the passive in common tenses and use it appropriately for Task 1 process descriptions and academic statements.
TIME	35 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Show a short list of everyday products (bread, glass, steel) and ask what happens to them in production. Collect verbs on the board in the active, then ask who does each step.

Lesson steps

1. Show the transformation from active to passive with three sentences and highlight the object becoming the subject.
2. Drill the form across tenses with a substitution table (is made, was made, has been made, will be made, can be made).
3. Give learners a process diagram, such as how glass is made, and have them describe it in pairs using the passive and sequence words.
4. Discuss when the active is better: compare two Task 2 sentences and decide which sounds clearer.
5. Learners write a full Task 1 process paragraph and underline every passive.

Extension

Learners find five passive sentences in a Reading text and explain why the writer chose the passive each time.

Answer key

1. b) is heated. The milk receives the action, so use the passive: is heated.
2. a) was built. The past simple passive is was + past participle.
3. b) are collected. Bottles cannot collect themselves, so the passive is needed.
4. c) happened. Happen has no object, so it has no passive form.
5. Part 4: *wash*. → **washed**. The second verb in the passive needs the past participle: washed.
6. Part 2: *was build* → **was built**. Build is irregular: the past participle is built.
7. The trees are cut down and transported to a factory. In a process description, the passive keeps the focus on the materials.
8. The report was published last month. The passive past simple is was + past participle.

9. The water is heated until it boils. The passive needs the past participle: heated.
10. The results were announced yesterday. Results is plural, so the passive uses were.

Questions learners often ask

What is the passive voice? It is a structure in which the subject receives the action: The letter was sent. It is formed with be + past participle.

When should I use the passive in IELTS? Use it for process diagrams in Task 1, for general or objective statements in Task 2, and whenever the doer is unknown or unimportant.

Should I always add by + the doer? No. Add it only when the doer is new or important information. In most passive sentences it is left out.

Can all verbs be passive? No. Only verbs that take an object can. Verbs like happen, arrive and die cannot be passive.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. (1999). Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English. Longman.

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