

PASSIVE TENSES

When we talk about verb tenses, it is usually assumed that we mean active verb tenses, and it isn't considered necessary to specify this. However, there is also a set of related passive verb tenses. With respect to time, each one of these is used in exactly the same way as the corresponding active tense. This means, for example, that if something is finished, and you need to use the passive to refer to it, the correct verb tense is the *simple past* passive.

One problem concerning passive verb tenses is that, because we don't need them so much when we are speaking, it is easy to forget how to construct them. Making and using passive tenses correctly is not the most difficult area of English, but like everything else, it requires practice.

The passive is formed by the auxiliary 'be' plus the past participle:

Present

simple	continuous	perfect	perfect continuous
it is repaired	it is being repaired	it has been repaired	(not useful)

Past

simple	continuous	perfect	perfect continuous
it was repaired	it was being repaired	it had been repaired	(not useful)

Future

simple	continuous	perfect	perfect continuous
it will be repaired	(not useful)	it will have been repaired	(not useful)

THE PASSIVE AND MODAL VERBS

The passive combines with modal verbs like this:

modal verb + be + past participle

A lot of money could be saved.

You may be surprised by the answer.

To refer to the past:

modal verb + have + been + past participle

The accident should have been avoided.

Their flight must have been delayed.

Note however:

A decision **had to be taken** yesterday.
(A decision really was taken.)

Compare with:

A decision **was to have been taken** yesterday.
(The decision should have been taken, but was not.)

USE OF THE PASSIVE

Passive verb tenses have the same restrictions on their use as active tenses. For example, past events require simple past tense to be used. Perfect continuous forms are not normally used, and future continuous is also rare.

The passive is often associated with describing processes, especially in formal English:
*The potatoes **are washed** and then **cut** into slices.*

It can be used to focus on a subject when the agent is unknown, or presumed to be 'everybody' or 'a lot of people':
*He **is** widely **admired** for his political courage.*

It may be preferred to the active tense when the agent is seen as insignificant:
*I've **been stung** by a wasp.*

Similarly, the human agent may not be the immediate centre of attention:
*This watch **was given** to me by my uncle.*

It can be used to distance the speaker from the situation, or to give an air of authority:
*You **were warned** about the dangers.*

PASSIVE REPORTING VERBS

English uses the passive of verbs such as 'say', 'think', 'suppose', 'report' etc, **not** the conditional, to report suppositions.

right: *Scotland **is supposed to be** very beautiful.*

wrong: ~~*Scotland **would be** very beautiful.*~~

right: *The epidemic **is thought to have been caused** by the polluted water.*

wrong: ~~*The epidemic **would have been caused** by the polluted water.*~~

Exercise 1

What is the correct completion for each passive sentence below?

1. Our groceries once a week.

- a) deliver
- b) are delivered
- c) are delivering

2. The station is temporarily closed because maintenance work

- a) is done
- b) being done
- c) is being done

3. I'm sorry. Your name from the list.

- a) was removing
- b) has been removed
- c) has been removing

4. The ship by a torpedo in World War Two.

- a) was sunk
- b) was sinking
- c) has been sunk

5. She stopped speaking because she constantly.

- a) was interrupting
- b) was being interrupted
- c) had been interrupting

6. Shakespeare's Hamlet by the Village Dramatic Society next Wednesday.

- a) is performed
- b) will be performing
- c) is being performed

7. The rocket and satellite at precisely 3 o'clock tomorrow afternoon.

- a) will be launched
- b) will be being launched
- c) will have been launched

8. Our clients of the problem.

- a) was informed
- b) have informed
- c) have been informed

9. No risks in the handling of the toxic material.

- a) are taking
- b) be taken
- c) are to be taken

10. Protective headgear at all times on the construction site.

- a) must wear
- b) must be worn
- c) must have been wearing

Exercise 2

Complete the passive verbs below with the correct words.

1. There is a health risk associated with these products, so they are not for sale.
 - a) approved
 - b) approving
 - c) been approved

2. The fire thought to have started in the warehouse.
 - a) is
 - b) has
 - c) would have

3. If by a qualified person, the procedure is perfectly safe.
 - a) did
 - b) done
 - c) is done

4. The spice highly valued by merchants in ancient times.
 - a) was
 - b) were
 - c) been

5. Once the renovations have completed, we'll be able to move back into our old offices.
 - a) Ø
 - b) being
 - c) been

6. The local authorities expected to pay 50% of the cost.
 - a) be
 - b) are
 - c) would

7. The figures should published last month.
 - a) being
 - b) been
 - c) have been

8. So far, our customers not been impressed by the design change.
 - a) are
 - b) were
 - c) have

9. It is unclear how many people will by the product recall.
 - a) affected
 - b) be affected
 - c) be affecting

10. The project largely by a grant from a charitable foundation.
 - a) is financing
 - b) have been financed
 - c) was financed

Exercise 3

Using the first sentence, complete the second one with a passive verb form.

1. The company recently **tested** a new sort of fuel.
Recently, a new sort of fuel by the company.
2. The entire industry **is watching** the innovations that we are making.
The innovations that we are making by the entire industry.
3. The local fire service **coordinated** the rescue efforts.
The rescue efforts by the local fire service.
4. We **have installed** smart technology throughout the building.
Smart technology throughout the building.
5. High costs for raw materials **have hit** our operations hard.
Our operations hard by the high costs of raw materials.
6. Londoners **call** the tower at 30, St Mary Axe 'the Gherkin'.
The tower at 30, St Mary Axe 'the Gherkin' by Londoners.
7. Sensors **will turn on** the lights if they detect human movement.
If sensors detect human movement, the lights
8. In his talk, Mr Hidetoshi demonstrated how we **could save** thousands of dollars.
Mr Hidetoshi's talk demonstrated how thousands of dollars
9. The country hopes **to use** renewable energy sources for 10 % of its needs by 2025.
The country hopes that renewable energy sources can for 10% of its needs by 2025.
10. The new plant **will produce** electricity to power more than 500,000 homes.
Electricity to power more than 500,000 homes by the new plant.
11. The city wants **to deepen** the harbour so that it will be able to take bigger ships.
In order to take bigger ships, the city wants the harbour
12. Why did nobody **tell** me about the emergency?
Why I not about the emergency?
13. You're early for the appointment. We **did not expect** you for another hour.
You're early for the appointment. You for another hour.
14. The trip will take two hours less after the **completion** of the high-speed line.
Once the high-speed line, the trip will take two hours less.
15. We hope that the exotic dishes on our menu **will tempt** you.
We hope that you by the exotic dishes on our menu.
16. Climate change **should concern** all of us.
We all by climate change.

17. We think it is best **to shut down** production while we **examine** the problem.
We think it is best if production while the problem

18. They **made** me **feel** stupid in the meeting.
I stupid in the meeting.

19. We would like to assure you that we have **found** you alternative accommodation.
We would like to assure you that alternative accommodation for you.

20. As you are a valued customer, we want to **pass on** news of this great offer to you!
We want news of this great offer to to you, one of our valued customers!

a warehouse – a building where products are stored before their distribution

figures – statistics, data, often financial

product recall – withdrawal of a faulty product from sale

a grant – a donation, also a bursary to study

throughout – everywhere in a place, also for the entire time (see below)

a gherkin – a small pickled cucumber

to power – to provide electrical or mechanical power

to deepen – to increase depth

accommodation – (uncountable) a place to stay or live, such as a hotel, house or apartment