
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Active and passive voice



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Catherine

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Catherine.

Finn

And me, Finn. And in today's programme we're talking about... Oww! You hit me! Catherine! That hurt!

Catherine

Yes, Finn, I hit you.

Finn

I hope there's a grammatical reason for that!

Catherine

Always, Finn. I wouldn't hit you without a good reason. And the reason is, we're talking about active and passive voice today. And in the active voice we say 'Catherine hit Finn': subject - verb - object. Like this:

Finn

Oww! You hit me again!! Hmmm:

Catherine

All in the name of grammar.

Finn

OK. You hit me. Subject - verb - object.

Catherine

That's right. So, speaking grammatically, the subject - that's me - performs or does the action...

Finn

And the object of the verb - that's me - receives or gets the action.

Catherine

Another one?

Finn

No. Catherine hit Finn. But of course I'm more important than you Catherine, so I want to be at the beginning of the sentence. Let's say it this way: Finn was hit by Catherine. Don't do it again.

Catherine

Ok - Finn was hit by Catherine. We put the receiver of the verb at the beginning of the sentence, plus the verb **to be** and the past participle, to make a passive sentence: Finn was hit by Catherine. So here's Rob with some examples of active and passive sentences.

First an active sentence:

Rob

Millions of people use the internet.

Catherine

And with the receiver of the verb at the beginning of the sentence – in the passive voice:

Rob

The internet is used by millions of people.

Catherine

Active:

Rob

A thief stole my car.

Catherine

Passive:

Rob

My car was stolen by a thief.

Catherine

Active:

Rob

Somebody rescued the child.

Catherine

Passive:

Rob

The child was rescued by somebody.

Finn

Thanks Rob. And now that Catherine has stopped hitting me, we can look at that last pair of sentences more closely.

Catherine

OK.

Finn

Thank you. Right, in many situations, the passive sentence **the child was rescued** would sound more natural than **somebody rescued the child** – now, that's if we feel the child is more important than the rescuer.

Catherine

Yes - and we don't know who rescued the child, so we don't need to say **by somebody**. It's just: **The child was rescued.**

Catherine

That's right - if you don't know who or what is doing the verb, or if it's not important, or if it's obvious, you can leave it out completely, like this:

Rob

My car was stolen.

Catherine

Let's have another sentence in active voice:

Rob

The storm destroyed the bridge.

Finn

And here it is in passive voice:

Rob

The bridge was destroyed by the storm.

Catherine

Here, the subject – the storm – is important, so we don't leave it out.

IDENT

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Catherine

And we're talking about active and passive voice.

Finn

That's right. When the thing receiving the action of the verb is important, you can show this importance, by putting it at the start of the sentence, and using the verb **to be** plus the past participle of the verb to make a passive form.

Catherine

And if the person or thing doing the verb is obvious, unimportant or unknown, you can leave it out.

Finn

Now for our quiz. Which of these news headlines sounds better: is it a)

Rob

85-year-old Mary Hiker has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro.

Finn

Or b)

Rob

Mount Kilimanjaro has been climbed by an 85-year-old, Mary Hiker.

Catherine

Well they are grammatically correct, but the active sentence a) is the best – if you agree with me that the name and age of the climber is more important than the name of the mountain she climbed!

Rob

85-year-old Mary Hiker has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro.

Finn

Next up – option a):

Rob

The police arrested the burglars and took them to the police station.

Finn

And option b):

Rob

The burglars were arrested and taken to the police station.

Catherine

And the passive in option b) is best – we can guess that the police arrested the burglars, so we don't need to mention them.

Rob

The burglars were arrested and taken to the police station.

Finn

And the last one - option a)

Rob

William posted a photo of his birthday party on his webpage.

Finn

And option b):

Rob

A photo of William's birthday party was posted by him on his webpage.

Catherine

And option a) sounds much better – William is most definitely the subject of this sentence!

Rob

William posted a photo of his birthday party on his webpage.

Catherine

Now, here's a tip for using the passive voice in spoken English. You may hear people use the verb **get** instead of the verb **be**, like this:

Rob

Your bike will get stolen if you don't lock it!

Finn

Right. And if you hit your colleagues, Catherine?

Catherine

If you hit your colleagues for a non-grammatical reason, Finn, you will get into trouble.

Finn

OK, thank you very much, and there we are: the passive voice is made with an object, plus the verb to be, plus the past participle.

Catherine

And we use it when we're more interested in the object of a verb, or if the subject is

unknown or obvious.

Finn

There's more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

Both

Bye.