

The passive

English B1

What this topic teaches

Sometimes the thing that *receives* the action is the star. English moves it to the front and builds the **passive** : **be + past participle**.

- Active: *The cat ate the homework*. Passive: *The homework **was eaten** (by the cat)*.
- Chinese has for this: . The idea is old; the English machinery is new: a form of *be* plus the participle, and the participle never changes.
- Memory hook: the passive is a spotlight swap. The actor steps back into the dark, and the object steps into the light.
- △ The verb needs *be* at the right tense plus the participle: *is made, was eaten, has been stolen*. No *be*, no passive.

be changes; the participle doesn't

Tense	Passive	Example
present simple	am/is/are + participle	English is spoken here.
past simple	was/were + participle	The bridge was built in 1990.
present perfect	have/has been + participle	My phone has been stolen !
future	will be + participle	The results will be announced tomorrow.
modal	modal + be + participle	Homework must be finished on time.

- *be* does all the tense work; the participle just sits there, being done to.
- The participle column you already own: *written, eaten, built, stolen, made*. Rebels included.

by: naming the actor

- The actor can appear after **by**: *The homework was eaten **by the cat***.
- But the passive usually exists precisely to skip the actor – because it is unknown (*My bike **was stolen***), obvious (*He **was arrested***. – by the police, obviously), or unimportant.

- △ If the actor is the most important thing in the sentence, go back to the active: *The cat ate my homework* is funnier and stronger. The passive is a tool, not a lifestyle.

When English prefers the passive

- **Rules and signs**: *English is spoken here. Bikes must not be parked here*.
- **Science and news** : *The experiment was repeated three times. Two pandas were born in Chengdu*.
- **Formal writing** : the passive sounds objective because it removes the *I*.
- Chinese uses its *bèi* passive much more rarely and often for bad news; English uses the passive neutrally and constantly. Don't be afraid of it.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **Never forget *be***. “*The homework written by the cat*” × – a participle alone is not a verb. *The homework **was** written*.
- △ **Not every verb can go passive**. Only verbs with an object work. “*Was happened*” × (*happen* has no object) – *It happened*. The *bèi* instinct tempts you; English checks the verb's licence.
- △ **Word order is not the Chinese order with English words**. “*The homework by the cat was eaten*” ×. English order: subject + be + participle (+ by-phrase at the end).
- △ **The subject and be must agree**. *The results **was** announced* × – *results* is plural: ***were** announced*.

Say it aloud

Report the news of the classroom in the passive.

- The homework was eaten by the cat. The cat has been interviewed. No comment was given.
- The test was finished by everyone. The results will be announced tomorrow. Fear is being felt.
- English is spoken in this classroom. Mistakes are made. Progress is celebrated .

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *The bridge* ____ (*build*) *in 1990*. – **was built**. Past simple passive: *was* + participle.
2. *My phone* ____ (*steal*)! (I just discovered it) – **has been stolen**. A present-perfect passive for a fresh disaster.
3. *The results* ____ (*announce*) *tomorrow*. – **will be announced**. Future passive.
4. “*It was happened yesterday*.” – $\times \rightarrow$ **It happened yesterday**. *happen* has no object; no licence for the passive.
5. *Zuòyè bèi māo chī le*. – **The homework was eaten by the cat**. Object first, *be* + participle, actor after *by*.