

55 Active and passive (1)

1 What is the sentence about?

Compare these two entries in an encyclopedia.

Alexander Graham Bell

A British inventor who went to live in Canada and then the USA. Bell invented the telephone.

Telephone

An apparatus with which people can talk to each other over long distances. The telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell.

Look at these two sentences.

ACTIVE

Bell invented the telephone.

PASSIVE

The telephone was invented by Bell.

The two sentences have the same meaning, but they are about different things. One sentence is about Bell, and the other is about the telephone. Each sentence begins with the subject. The subject is the starting-point of the sentence, the thing we are talking about. The new information about the subject comes at the end of the sentence.

We say *Bell invented the telephone* because we are talking about **Bell**, and the new information is that he invented **the telephone**.

When the subject is the person or thing doing the action (the agent), then we use an active verb.

ACTIVE

Bell invented the telephone.

Subject and agent

The subject (**Bell**) is the agent.

We say *The telephone was invented by Bell* because we are talking about **the telephone**, and the new information is that it was invented by **Bell**.

When the subject is not the agent (is not doing the action), then we use a passive verb.

PASSIVE

The telephone was invented by *Bell*.

Subject

Agent

The subject (**the telephone**) is not the agent. It is the thing that the action is directed at.

2 The passive and by the police, in 1876, etc.

In a passive sentence, when we want to say who or what did the action, we use **by**.

*On our way home we were stopped **by the police**. The new hospital will be opened **by the Queen**.*

*The paper was all blown away **by the wind**.*

We can give other details about the action. For example, we can use a phrase saying when or where something happens.

*The telephone was invented **in 1876**. The visitors will be driven **to the airport**.*

*The concerts are usually held **at the university**.*

Sometimes there is no phrase after the verb.

*A new swimming-pool **is being built**. All the documents **have been destroyed**.*

For more details see Unit 56.

Practice

A Active or passive verb? (1)

Choose the correct verb forms in this news report about a storm.

Millions of pounds' worth of damage (▶) ~~has caused~~ has been caused by a storm which (1) swept/was swept across the north of England last night. The River Ribble (2) burst/was burst its banks after heavy rain. Many people (3) rescued/were rescued from the floods by fire-fighters, who (4) received/were received hundreds of calls for help. Wind speeds (5) reached/were reached ninety miles an hour in some places. Roads (6) blocked/were blocked by fallen trees, and electricity lines (7) brought/were brought down, leaving thousands of homes without electricity. 'Everything possible (8) is doing/is being done to get things back to normal,' a spokesman (9) said/was said.

B By the police, etc. (2)

In each of these sentences underline who or what is doing the action (the agent).

- ▶ The traffic was all heading out of town.
- 1 The photo was taken by my brother.
- 2 The water was pouring out of the hole.
- 3 A policeman has been murdered by terrorists.
- 4 We were woken by the alarm.
- 5 The guide led a group of tourists around the castle.
- 6 The dog has bitten several people.

C Active and passive (1–2)

You are telling a friend some news. Use the notes and complete the second sentence. Sometimes you need to use the active and sometimes the passive.

- ▶ (Past Simple: Claire / go / to Florida / last month)
You remember Claire? She went to Florida last month.
- ▶ (Present Perfect: send / our luggage / to Australia)
Bad news about our luggage. It's been sent to Australia.
- 1 (Past Simple: Claude Jennings / win / the quiz competition)
Did you hear about the quiz competition? It
- 2 (Past Simple: Mrs Miles / do / a parachute jump / last week)
You know Mrs Miles? She
- 3 (Present Perfect: a bull / attack / David)
Have you heard about David? He's
- 4 (Present Continuous: build / the house)
Trevor and Laura have bought a house. It's still
- 5 (Present Simple: Andrew / like / Jessica)
Did I tell you about Andrew? He
- 6 (Present Perfect: throw away / your stamp collection)
Bad news about your stamp collection. It's
- 7 (Present Perfect: Martians / kidnap / my neighbours)
Did I mention my neighbours? They've
- 8 (Past Simple: five people / see / the ghost)
Did you hear about the ghost? It