



Word-Classes in E4BT

2. VERBS – part II

A spotlight on passive and active forms

**passive form = auxiliary verb “to be”
+ past participle of a full verb**

English has **two forms** (also called “**voices**”) – **active and passive**: as it happens in Italian as well, if the subject of a sentence is the ‘doer’, that sentence is in the active form; if the subject of that sentence is the recipient of the action, that sentence is in the passive form:

- ✓ Uranium **is mined** in Australia. [*present simple*]
- ✓ A new extension **is being built**. [*present continuous*]
- ✓ The University of Teramo **was established** in 1993. [*past simple*]
- ✓ Penicillin **was discovered** by Alexander Fleming in 1928. [*past simple*]
- ✓ The biotechnological method of directed evolution **has been applied** to produce by mutation a large number of *Penicillium* strains. [*present perfect*]
- ✓ Some scientists have hypothesized that the indiscriminate use of antibiotics alter the host microbiota and this **has been associated with** chronic disease. [*present perfect*]

REMEMBER THAT the subject of a passive verb corresponds to the object of an active verb; furthermore, if we want to say who does the action in a passive sentence – that is, the agent – we use the preposition ‘**by**’:

- ✓ In 1885, **Theodor Escherich** **discovered this organism** and **called it** *Bacterium coli commune*.
- ✓ **This organism** **was discovered by** **Theodor Escherich** in 1885 and **was called** *Bacterium coli commune*.

There is no doubt that active voice is usually preferred because it is more direct and always less wordy.

USES OF PASSIVE VOICE

1. FOCUSING ON THE ACTION: we use a passive construction when we are not interested in who performs an action or it is not necessary to know:

- ✓ Smallpox **was localized** in small blood vessels of the skin and in the mouth and throat.
- ✓ The date **was changed**.
- ✓ Second shots of coronavirus vaccine **could be delayed** even further amid growing evidence that spacing out the doses improves their effectiveness.

2. FOCUSING ON INFORMATION: in a passive sentence, the grammatical subject receives the focus:

- ✓ The CDC* visiting delegation **was met** by the Governor of Kansas at the airport.

*CDC = Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

3. DESCRIBING A PROCESS OR PROCEDURE: we use the passive because we are more concerned with the process itself than with who carries it out.

Here follows a description of the wine-making process, where the passive forms (in this case, all verbs are in the simple present tense) are highlighted in red:

Wine **is made** from the fermented juice of grapes. Grapes **are picked** at optimum sugar/acidity levels. After picking, grapes **are taken** to the winery, **de-stemmed** and **crushed** in a variety of presses. Juice **is** then **clarified** by settling or by centrifuge; yeast and sugar **are added**, then wine **is left** to ferment in tanks. When fermentation **is finished**, wine **is poured** into a clean tank to stabilise. It **can** then **be filtered**, **bottled** and **left** to mature.

4. WRITING IN A FORMAL STYLE: when writing reports, minutes of meetings, etc., we often choose an impersonal style by using the passive and beginning sentences with 'it':

- ✓ Following a multistate outbreak of listeriosis linked to Blue Bell Creameries products, **it was agreed** to carry out / implement a research project on that topic.
- ✓ **It was considered** to be an unacceptable alternative.

5. REPORTING UNCONFIRMED INFORMATION: when the statement is speculative – i.e., based on guessing or opinions – we use the passive of verbs such as *to say, to think, to consider, to believe, to expect, to suppose, to know* followed by an infinitive. This structure is common in newspaper reporting where we want to make our language less certain:

- ✓ Local authorities **are said to be** in favour of mass vaccination of stray animals.
- ✓ The virus that causes SARS **is thought to be transmitted** most readily by respiratory droplets (droplet spread) produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.
- ✓ Worldwide, the average life span **is expected to extend** another 10 years by 2050.
- ✓ Each of us has a unique set of microbial communities, which **are believed to play** an important role in digestion and in protection from disease.
- ✓ Multiple sclerosis drugs market global sales **are expected to reach** US\$ 49.3 billion by 2030, as stated by InsightSlice.
- ✓ Certain pathogenic strains of E. Coli **are known to pass** from animals to humans through food products.

BE CAREFUL TO those verbs which have two objects (for example: *to give, to send, to show, to lend, to pay, to promise, to refuse, to tell, to offer*); it is always possible to put such verbs into their own passive voice:

- ✓ The director **told** the staff the news this morning.
- ✓ The staff **was/were told** the news by the director this morning.
- ✓ Well-meaning physicians **have given** many patients drugs only to discover that they have an addiction to their medication.
- ✓ Many patients **have been given** drugs by well-meaning physicians only to discover that they have an addiction to their medication.

⚠⚠ BEWARE of the translation into Italian of these last passive forms!! ⚠⚠

Some verbs – the so called “action verbs”, for instance – cannot be used in the passive, while a sentence like this is **passive of necessity**, i.e., you do not have the choice to convert it into an active form:

- ✓ Those dishes **are made of** plastic.

Glances at transitive and intransitive uses

Some verbs can be used either transitively [T] or intransitively [I]. Look at the following examples:

1) to breed (bred, bred, breeding)¹

- ✓ Many animals **breed** only at certain times of the year. [I]
- ✓ Highland cows **have been bred** for their meat. [T, passive form]
- ✓ Dogs **have been** selectively **bred** for generations to exhibit specific physical and behavioral traits [T, passive form]
- ✓ Rabbits **are bred** for their long coats. [T, passive form]
- ✓ Greyhounds **were** originally **bred** as hunting dogs. [T, passive form]
- ✓ She **breeds** sheep. [T]
- ✓ They are attempting to **breed** a new disease-resistant type of corn. [T]
- ✓ Many plants **are bred/grown** to withstand drought and use natural resources like water more efficiently. [T, passive form]

2) to grow (grew, grown, growing)²

- ✓ He **grows** roses. [T]
- ✓ They **grow** a lot of wheat in this region. [T]
- ✓ The Guinea pigs **grow** well. [I]
- ✓ My cold **has grown into** bronchitis. [I]
- ✓ Tomatoes **grow** best in direct sunlight. [I]
- ✓ Some of these creatures **grew** to a length of over 12 feet. [I]
- ✓ The land is used to **grow** crops. [T]

¹ Remember the Italian translation of the verb **to breed** in such contexts: (intr.) *riprodursi*; (tr.) *allevare, far accoppiare, selezionare* (una specie animale o vegetale), *coltivare*. Compare it with the verb **to farm**: (tr.) *coltivare, allevare*.

² Remember the Italian translation of the verb **to grow** in such contexts: (intr.) *creocere*; (tr.) *coltivare*.

Warning: pay attention to the differences between English and Italian! Please reflect on the following sentences and the transitive/intransitive use of the verbs in red³:

1) to enter (entered, entered, entering)

- ✓ “Huge concern about increased risk of *peste des petits ruminants* **entering** Europe [...]”;
- ✓ “KBP BioSciences [...] today announced that the US FDA-approved KBP-7026 to **enter** clinical trials for the potential treatment of respiratory diseases such as asthma and COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)”;
- ✓ “[...] Drug-resistant strains of bacteria could be fatal if they **enter** the human body through uncooked or improperly cooked food [...]”;
- ✓ “Tuberculosis Among Foreign-Born Persons **Entering** the United States. Recommendations of the Advisory Committee for Elimination of Tuberculosis [...]”;

2) to suffer (suffered, suffered, suffering)

- ✓ 25% of people who **suffer from** migraines experience vertigo along with their other headache symptoms.
- ✓ Persons experiencing sleep insufficiency are also more likely/susceptible to **suffer from** chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, depression, and obesity, as well as from cancer, increased mortality, and reduced quality of life and productivity.
- ✓ Newborns **suffer** the most serious consequences of listeriosis, including pneumonia, a blood infection, and meningitis.
- ✓ Crops **suffered** serious damage as a result of the floods.
- ✓ Declawing may also be performed to protect people, particularly those who are geriatric, diabetic or have compromised immune systems and so may **suffer** life-threatening complications from cat scratches.

Thus, a **transitive verb** is any verb accompanied by a direct object and from which a passive can be formed; while an **intransitive verb** is any verb that indicates a complete action without being accompanied by a direct object and that does not form a passive.

³ Some transitive verbs, such as **enter**, **fit**, **have**, **lack**, **resemble**, **suit**, **suffer**, can never be used in the passive voice.

Compound predicate

A **compound predicate** consists of two (or more) verbs sharing the same subject, such as in:

- ✓ The cardiologist said Amber **should reduce** her sugar intake and **increase** her level of exercise.
- ✓ Funding of prevention, surveillance, and eradication efforts in the countries where outbreaks are occurring or in at-risk countries **will provide** tools needed to facilitate the eradication process of this virus where it is detected **and will prevent** further spread and subsequent economic loss.
- ✓ Environmentalists oppose development which **produces** pollution **and endangers** the health of local people **and depletes** resources.