

Word-classes in English for Communication Professionals

VERBS

English has three kinds of verbs:

1. **full verbs**, also called **main verbs** or **lexical verbs**

- ✓ tell you “what happened” or “what the situation is”;
- ✓ have **regular** and/or **irregular** forms → **verbal paradigms**;
- ✓ can be used **transitively** and/or **intransitively**;
- ✓ have an **active** and a **passive** form.

Furthermore...

- ✓ can be used in **lexical collocations** (e.g.: to be leaked to the press, to spread the news, to give a performance, to use AI, to resign as chairman, to establish a company, and so on);
- ✓ can be used in **grammatical collocations** (e.g.: to call for, to deal with, to focus on, to listen to, to result in, to result from, and so on ...);
- ✓ **false friends** (e.g.: to advertise, to annoy, to attend, to arrange, to expect, to occur, to pretend, to process, to realize, to recover, and so on);
- ✓ **compound predicates** or **verbs** (e.g.: The ducks flew overhead and landed in the water).

2. **auxiliaries**

- ✓ to be (was/were, been), [used to form continuous forms (to be + -ing form) and passive forms (to be + past participle)]
- ✓ to have (had, had), [used to form present perfect (have/has + past participle) and past perfect (had + past participle)]
- ✓ to do (did, done) [used to form interrogative and negative forms of present simple and past simple]
- ✓ are used to make complex verbal structures or verbal phrases.

3. **modals**, also called **auxiliary modals**

- ✓ can, could; may, might; will, would; shall, should; have to, must, ought to, need ... and so on;
- ✓ add subjective extra meaning.



REMEMBER that auxiliaries and modals differ from full verbs in four ways, the so-called **NICE** features (**N**egation, **I**nversion, **C**ode, **E**mphasis).

Transitive and intransitive uses

1. **some verbs can be used either transitively or intransitively¹**, as in the examples below:

- **to grow (grew, grown, growing)²**

- ✦ He *grows* roses. [tr.]
- ✦ He has spent the past seven years *growing* his business. [tr.]
- ✦ The economy *has grown* by 0.5% over the past year. [intr.]
- ✦ The problem continues *to grow*. [intr.]
- ✦ I *grew up* in Rome. [intr.]

- **to run (ran, run, running)³**

- ✦ John can *run* very fast. [intr.]
- ✦ He has no idea how *to run* a business. [tr.]
- ✦ Both candidates *have run* a good campaign. [tr.]
- ✦ Alan *was running* for a bus when he slipped on some ice. [intr.]
- ✦ The college *runs* summer courses for foreign students. [tr.]
- ✦ Hilary Clinton *ran* for president in 2016. [intr.]

2. **pay attention to the differences between English and Italian!** Please reflect on the following sentences and the transitive/intransitive use of each verb used⁴:

- ✦ “The humanitarian community’s plan to flood Gaza with lifesaving aid passed an important milestone on Thursday with the news that more than 10,000 relief lorries **have entered** the enclave since the ceasefire began on 19 January.” (source: «Gaza: 10,000 aid trucks reached enclave since ceasefire began», *UN News*, 6 February 2025);
- ✦ “Canada's new Prime Minister Mark Carney **entered** politics as trade relations with the U.S. hit a low point.” (source: «What to know about Canada's Mark Carney», *NPR*, April 17, 2025);

¹ Remember that when you can use a verb both transitively and intransitively, it is referred to as an example of *functional shift*.

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

³ Remember the Italian translation of the verb *to run* in such contexts: (intr.) *correre*, *candidarsi*; (tr.) *gestire*, *organizzare*.

⁴ Some transitive verbs, such as *enter*, *fit*, *have*, *lack*, *resemble*, *suit*, *suffer*, can never be used in the passive voice.

- ✧ “Experts: Global South countries **suffer from** Trump's tariff policy” (source: *CGTN*, 21 April 2025);
- ✧ “UK trade volumes **suffer** record five-year decline” (*Financial Times*, March 1, 2024).
- ✧ “Ukraine’s Roma **have suffered** worse than most in the war”. (*The Economist*, October 3, 2024).
- ✧ “Several economists have found that people who **enter** the job market in a recession **suffer** lasting damage to their incomes” (*Financial Times*, April 2, 2021).

Passive and active forms

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

English has **two forms** (or “**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.

Active	Passive
<p><i>Currency dealers trade millions of dollars every day.</i></p> <p><i>Mike is installing the software tomorrow.</i></p> <p><i>The Central Bank raised interest rates by 0.25%.</i></p> <p><i>They have chosen Mr Brady as the new CEO.</i></p> <p><i>We will make a decision tomorrow.</i></p> <p><i>Someone should clean this machine every month.</i></p>	<p><i>Millions of dollars are traded every day.</i></p> <p><i>The software is being installed tomorrow.</i></p> <p><i>Interest rates were raised by 0.25%.</i></p> <p><i>Mr Brady has been chosen as the new CEO.</i></p> <p><i>A decision will be made tomorrow.</i></p> <p><i>This machine should be cleaned every month.</i></p>

CEO = Chief Executive Officer = MD = Managing Director (BrEng) = Amministratore Delegato = AD

- ✓ Uranium **is mined** in Australia.
- ✓ A new extension **is being built**.
- ✓ The Inland Revenue⁵ **was set up/established/created/founded** in 1665.
- ✓ The company **has been taken over**.

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 – the agent –, we use the preposition ‘**by**’:

- ✓ Richard Branson **founded** Virgin Records.
- ✓ Virgin Records **was founded by** Richard Branson.

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

⁵ The **Inland Revenue** (UK) corresponded, up to 2005, to the **Internal Revenue Service** (USA) and to **Agenzia delle Entrate** (ITALY). Now it is named **HM Revenue and Customs**.

USES

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:
 - ✓ Millions of dollars **are traded** every day.
 - ✓ The date **was changed**.
 - ✓ Europe's 2035 combustion engine ban **might be delayed**.

2. **FOCUSING ON INFORMATION:** in a passive sentence, the grammatical subject receives the focus:
 - ✓ The visiting delegation **was met** by the President at the airport.

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 (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':
 - ✓ It **was agreed** to increase share capital. /Si concordò/convenne di aumentare il capitale azionario
 - ✓ It **was considered** to be an unacceptable alternative. / si considerò essere un'alternativa irricevibile
5. **REPORTING UNCONFIRMED INFORMATION:** when the statement is speculative, i.e., based on guessing or opinions, we use the passive of *say*,

think, consider, believe, expect, suppose, know followed by an infinitive. This structure is common in newspaper reporting where we want to make our language less certain:

- ✓ The board **is thought to be** deeply split over the way the company has been run.
- ✓ The economy **is expected to decrease** next year by around 2%.
- ✓ More than 100 million people across 185 countries **are said to use** ChatGPT every week.

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

REMEMBER THAT:

- A '**compound predicate**' or '**compound verb**' consists of two (or more) verbs sharing the same subject, such as in:
 - ✓ Environmentalists oppose development which **produces** pollution and **endangers** the health of local people and **depletes** resources.
 - ✓ True leaders understand that in order to create a positive culture for their organization, they **must lead** by example and **display** the behaviours they want to see exercised by their staff.
- be careful to those verbs which have **two objects** (give, send, show, lend, pay, promise, refuse, tell, 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.
 - ✓ The bill **gave** all workers the right to elect a representative in their workplace.
 - ✓ All workers **were given** the right to elect a representative in their workplace.