**Passive Voice**

*Voice is a grammatical term* that "pertains to who or what serves as the *subject* in a clause". Read the example below:

The politician kissed the baby.

The order of SUBJECT–VERB–OBJECT (SVO) is the predominant word order pattern in English.

There are two main "voices" in English sentences: *active voice* and *passive voice*.

The sentence "The politician kissed the baby" is in active voice, because "the politician" begins the sentence and *does* the action. The "do-er" of the action is called the *agent*.

Passive voice occurs when the object, not the subject, is the agent:

The baby was kissed by the politician.

**Forming Passive Voice**

To form the passive voice, add a *be* verb (*is/are/was/were*) + the past participle form of the main verb.

### Passive Voice (PV) + Simple Present

- PV + present perfect*
- PV + present progressive*
- PV + simple past
- PV + past progressive*
- PV + future modality
- PV + modals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive voice (PV) + Simple Present</th>
<th>Paper is made in Tacoma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper has been made in Tacoma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper is being made in Tacoma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This paper was made in Tacoma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper was being made in Tacoma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper will be made in Tacoma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper can be made in Tacoma.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Less common in academic writing

(continued on reverse)

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1 Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 343

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**Uses of Passive Voice**

Below are two common reasons to use passive voice:

1) To describe an action for which the agent (or "do-er" of the action) is unknown:

   That Bank **was robbed** last week.

2) When the agent is known but is NOT the topic of focus:

   "For Whom the Bell Tolls" is a novel set amidst the Spanish Civil War. It **was written** by Ernest Hemingway.

In the example above, the novel—not Hemingway—is the writer's topic. So, the writer uses passive voice to keep the novel ("it") as the subject.

**Passive Voice in Academic Discourse**

Academic writers often use passive voice to distance themselves from an action or result out of concern for academic discourse conventions (especially in science):

   Study participants **were shown** three images. Next, participants **were prompted** to describe their feelings about each image.

Passive voice is common in formal academic discourse because the preference for avoiding first and second person pronouns (*I, we*) prevents writers from being the agents of their own actions:

*We showed the participants three images.----> The participants **were shown** three images.

**Verbs Frequently Used with Passive Voice in Academic Writing**

- make
- see
- find
- consider
- give
- use
- do
- show

**Common Passive Voice Mistakes**

Passive voice works only with **transitive verbs**, which are verbs that must link to an object (e.g. *give*: *She gave the book to a student*. English speakers would likely not say only "She gave.")

**Intransitive verbs**, such as *happen* and *occur*, cannot take objects, and therefore cannot be used in passive voice:

*This problem **was happened** in my country.
*The change in climate **was occurred** in coastal areas.

*Sources consulted in the compilation of this resource are *The Grammar Book* (2nd ed.) (Larsen-Freeman & Ceke-Murcia, 1999, pp. 343-355) and *Teaching Academic ESL Writing* (Hinkel, 2004, pp. 162-169). Compiled by Kelvin Keown 7/2011, for the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Washington-Tacoma. Contact Kelvin at kelvin3@uw.edu.*

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