



learning target

Aim of this section is to learn how to form the passive voice.

German	English
Das Haus wird gebaut .	The house is being built.
Das Auto wurde komplett zerstört .	The car was completely destroyed.
Das Handy ist verkauft worden .	The mobile phone has been sold.

rules

What's the purpose of the passive voice?

You will find the passive voice mostly in written or formal spoken German e.g. news, reports on scientific experiments, newspaper, literature.

The passive voice is used to emphasise the action / process and not the agent (person or thing who is acting). It's not important who does something but what is done.

example:

active voice

- **Herr Schmidt** baut ein Haus.
(Mr Schmidt is building a house.)

passive voice

- Ein Haus **wird gebaut**.
(A house is being built.)

In the active voice the emphasis is placed on the agent (Herr Schmidt). It's important that he is the one who is building a house.

In the passive voice it doesn't matter who is building a house. The emphasis is placed on the action "ein Haus bauen".



How do you form the passive voice?

Präsens (present tense)

In the Präsens tense you form the passive voice with:
form of "werden" + Partizip II

examples:

- Ich **werde geküsst**. (I'm being kissed.)
- Du **wirst verbannt**. (You are being banned.)
- Es **wird verbrannt**. (It is being burned.)
- Wir **werden verfolgt**. (We are being followed.)
- Ihr **werdet entdeckt**. (You are being discovered.)
- Sie **werden hergestellt**. (They are being produced.)

Let's discuss the first example a bit more in detail.

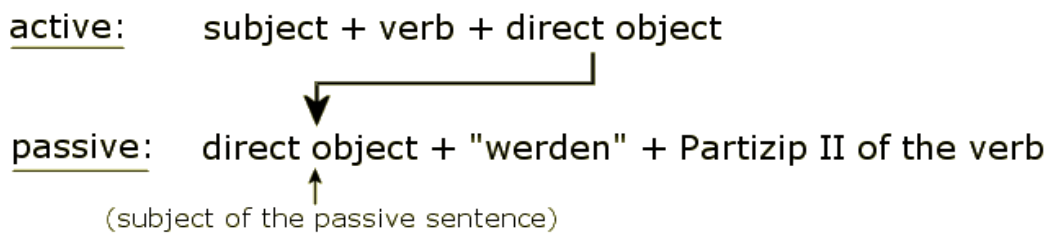
active voice

- **Cathy** küsst mich. (Cathy kisses me.)

passive voice

- Ich **werde geküsst**. (I'm being kissed.)

"Cathy" is the subject in the active voice sentence. I'm the direct object and "kiss" is the verb.
 In the passive voice the direct object turns into the subject and has, therefore, to be in the nominative case.
 The verb is replaced by "werden" + Partizip II. The subject of the active voice sentence disappears usually completely.



How to state the agent?

Like in English there is a possibility to state the agent (=subject of the active voice sentence).
 In English you use the preposition "by".

In German there are two prepositions to state the agent:

- **von** (if the agent is a person)
- **durch** (if the agent is an inanimate thing)

...whereby you will mostly need the von-agent.



examples:

passive voice without agent

- Ich **werde geküsst**.
(I'm being kissed.)
- Das Haus **wird zerstört**.
(The house is being destroyed.)

passive voice with agent

- Ich **werde von Cathy geküsst**.
(I'm being kissed by Cathy.)
- Das Haus **wird durch den Sturm zerstört**.
(The house is being destroyed by the storm.)

Passive voice in other tenses

Be aware that the passive voice is not a tense!

The passive voice is a verb structure which allows you to emphasise the action/process and this in every tense.

Präteritum (simple past)

In the Präteritum tense you form the passive voice with:
form of "wurden" + Partizip II

examples:

- Ich **wurde verhaftet**. (I was arrested.)
- Die Stadt **wurde zerstört**. (The city was destroyed.)
- Wir **wurden gezwungen**. (We were forced.)

Perfekt (present perfect)

In the Perfekt tense you form the passive voice with:
form of "sein" + Partizip II + worden

examples:

- Ich **bin entlassen worden**. (I have been released.)
- Die Schule **ist geschlossen worden**. (The school has been closed.)
- Die Probleme **sind gelöst worden**. (The problems have been solved.)

Plusquamperfekt (past perfect)

In the Perfekt tense you form the passive voice with:
form of "war" + Partizip II + worden



examples:

- Nachdem ich **kontrolliert worden war**, durfte ich in das Flugzeug.
(After I had been checked I was allowed to enter the airplane.)
- Als wir die Grenze erreichten, **war** diese bereits **geschlossen worden**.
(When we arrived the border it had already been closed.)
- Bevor der Forscher die Lösung fand, **war** das Problem bereits **gelöst worden**.
(Before the researcher found the solution the problem already had been solved.)

Hint

What you learned so far about the passive voice should be enough on your current level. However, I'd like add some more (complicate) theory for further studies.

Active sentences without a direct object

You learned that the direct object becomes the grammatical subject in a passive voice sentence. What if there is no direct object included as you find in many dative sentences? Remember the indirect object is the dative case.

example 1:

active voice

Sie antwortet mir. (She answers me.)

- "Sie" is the subject of the sentence
- "antworten" is the verb of the sentence - a dative verb
- "mir" is the indirect object

Since there is no direct object we use the dummy subject **Es**.

passive voice

Es **wird** mir **geantwortet**. (I'm being answered.)

- "Es" is the dummy subject of the sentence
- "wird" is the conjugated form of "werden"
- "mir" is the indirect object
- "geantwortet" is Partizip II of "antworten"

Now it becomes a bit crazy. It's logical to use a dummy subject if there is no subject but it's even possible to leave out this dummy subject "Es" and keep the rest of the sentence.

Mir **wird geantwortet**. (I'm being answered.)

All we change is the word order of the remaining words since the verb (here: helping verb "werden") has to be in the second position.



Be aware that "mir" is not the subject of the sentence.

"Mir" is obviously dative case and the subject is always in the nominative case.

The sentence doesn't contain a subject but we keep the conjugated form of "werden" as if the dummy subject "Es" were there.

example 2:

active voice

Ich helfe den Kindern. (I help the children.)

- "Ich" is the subject of the sentence
- "helfen" is the verb of the sentence - a dative verb
- "die Kinder" is the indirect object

passive voice (with dummy subject)

Es **wird** den Kindern **geholfen**. (The children are being helped.)

passive voice (without dummy subject)

Den Kindern **wird geholfen**. (The children is being helped.)

The following example makes this very clear:

Even if the dummy subject "Es" is not explicitly stated the verb "werden" has to be in the third person singular (wird).

Don't put "werden" because you think "die Kinder" is plural. They are plural but they are not the subject of the sentence and only the subject determines the conjugated form of "werden".

Active sentences without any object

There is no way in English to turn an active sentence without any object into a passive voice. In German there is!

example 1:

active voice

Die Kinder schlafen nachts. (The children sleep at night.)

- "Die Kinder" is the subject of the sentence
- "schlafen" is the verb of the sentence
- "nachts" is a simple time expression

passive voice

Es **wird** nachts **geschlafen**. (No direct translation! ~ people sleep at night)

- "Es" is the dummy subject of the sentence
- "wird" is the conjugated form of "werden"



- "nachts" is a simple time expression
- "geschlafen" is Partizip II of "schlafen"

example 2:

active voice

Matthias raucht zu viel. (Matthias smokes too much.)

- "Matthias" is the subject of the sentence
- "rauchen" is the verb of the sentence
- "zu viel" is a simple adverb

passive voice

Es **wird** zu viel **geraucht**. (No direct translation! ~ people smoke too much)

The two different passive voice types

There is one last thing we have to speak about.

There are two different types of a passive voice:

- werden-passive (Vorgangspassiv)
- sein-passive (Zustandspassiv)

The sein-passive is also formed with Partizip II but instead of the helping verb "werden" you use the helping verb "sein".

example 1:

werden-passive

- Die Tür **wird verschlossen**.
(The door is being locked.)

sein-passive

- Die Tür **ist verschlossen**.
(The door is locked.)

The werden-passive focus on the process "to lock the door".

The sein-passive describes the result of the process.

example 2:

werden-passive

- Das Rauchen **wurde verboten**.
(Smoking has been forbidden.)

sein-passive

- Das Rauchen **ist verboten**.
(Smoking is forbidden.)

The werden-passive describes the process. Somebody put a ban on smoking.

The sein-passive shows the result of it. It's forbidden to smoke nowadays.