

Grammar notes: passives

Basic information

The **passive** is used when you move the focus of an **active** sentence from the subject to the object, for example: *The passive is used when you move the focus of an active sentence.*

I've used **the passive** in the first part of the sentence because it's the most important thing, but then I've changed to **the active** because it's you who has to decide to move the focus of the sentence or not.

I've probably made things too complicated here, so a more typical example would be:

Hamlet **was written** by Shakespeare.

Shakespeare **wrote** Hamlet.

In the first example I'm concentrating on the play, Hamlet, and not on the person who wrote it. In the second example I'm more interested in Shakespeare himself.

The passive form is often associated with written and/or more formal language. This is true to a certain extent, but it doesn't mean passive=formal, active=informal.

Using the active form can make writing appear more vivid and alive, while using the passive can hide identity. Both forms therefore have their uses that have little to do with being formal or not.

Formation

The passive is very easy to form: **subject** + **to be in relevant tense** + **past participle**

Just change the verb to be to whatever tense you need. The past participle never changes.

	is	
	is being	
	was	
The work	was being	done.
	has been	
	had been	
	will be	
	will have been	

There are passive infinitives and gerunds which are also formed with the verb to be:

The work should **be finished** by Friday.

No work needs **to be done** over the weekend.

Being punished for bad behaviour is normal at school.

Potatoes have **to be washed** before being cooked.

The agent

The agent would be the subject of an active sentence. It is introduced using *by*:

That film was directed *by Hitchcock*.

The dinner is being cooked *by my sister*.

The prisoner was shot *by the police* while trying to escape.

You don't need to include the agent if you don't know it, if it doesn't matter, or if it's obvious:

He was arrested yesterday (by the police, obviously).

The building I live in was built in the 1920s (but I don't know who built it, and it doesn't matter anyway).

You aren't allowed to smoke in here (by law? by the management?).

Impersonal use

This is the part Spanish people don't like at all. However, this form is often used in English, especially in things like newspaper reports.

Structures:

It + passive reporting verb + that + clause

subject + passive reporting verb + to infinitive

Both these structures are used, but the first one is probably the most usual because it can be used with almost any sentence:

It is said that twenty people have died in the explosion.

Twenty people are said to have died in the explosion.

It is believed that the prime minister is on the point of resigning.

The prime minister is believed to be on the point of resigning.

It was agreed that the strike would end at midnight.

It has been estimated that 200 new jobs will be created.

The equivalent structure in Spanish is often the reflexive:

Se dice que...

Se supone que...

Some of the verbs you can use with this structure are believe, calculate, claim, consider, discover, estimate, feel, hope, know, prove, report, say, show, think, understand, etc.