

Unit 44: USING THE PASSIVE

Units 42-43 show you how to make correct passive sentences. This unit tells you when you can use the passive. In general, we use passives more often in writing than in speaking.

1 When the agent (Unit 42) is obvious

In this sentence:

The enemy soldiers killed hundreds of our soldiers in the battle.

we do not really need to know who killed our soldiers; we can already guess because this is what happens every time there is a battle. So, it is better to write:

Hundreds of our soldiers **were killed** in the battle.

Here are some more examples:

I **was born** in 1960.

AGENT

My mother

There has been heavy snow in the north.

Several roads **have been blocked** and telephone lines **have been cut**.

The snow

2 When the agent is not important

In this sentence:

People make bread from wheat.

we are not really interested in people; we are talking about bread. So, it is better to write:

Bread **is made** from wheat.

Here are some more examples:

Japan **is called** 'the Land of the Rising Sun'.

By people

He **was last seen** in Montreal in 1976.

By somebody

The noise **could be heard** all over town.

By everybody

Have the dishes **been done** yet?

By anybody

3 When the agent is 'new' information

Look at these two sentences:

The Tempest is a great play. Shakespeare wrote it in 1603.

In the second sentence, we already know about the play (we learnt about it in the first sentence). But the writer's name is new information. In English, we usually put the new information after the 'old' in a sentence when the 'old' information (the play) is of more interest to the speaker than the new information. So, it is better to write:

The Tempest is a great play. It **was written** by Shakespeare in 1603.

Here are some more examples:

The Parthenon in Athens is a fine building. It **was built** by the Ancient Greeks.

The new information in the second sentence is the Ancient Greeks.

Terrible news! John **has been run** over by a bus.

We all know John, but we don't know the bus.

There are disagreements about the discovery of America. Some say it **was discovered** by Columbus in 1492, but others say it **was discovered** much earlier by Brendan, an Irish monk.

The new information in the second sentence is the names Columbus and Brendan.

4 To be polite

It **is forbidden** to speak to the driver while the bus is moving.

More polite than:

We forbid you to speak to the driver while the bus is moving.

Money **should not be left** in the rooms.

More polite than:

You should not leave money in the rooms.