



Lesson 18. Mastering the verbs 13

The Passive Voice

Mastering is all about knowing how to say it and when to say it.

Compare:

- There is only one thing in the world worse than when **they talk about you**, and that is **they don't talk about you**.
- There is only one thing in the world worse than **being talked about**, and that is **not being talked** about.

What are the differences?

1. In the first sentence, the subject is people (“they”). In the second example, the subject is “one thing”.
2. In the first sentence, the main verb is in the simple past tense: “talked”. In the second sentence the verb is in the passive voice: Being talked (literally “siendo hablado”)

What is the passive voice?

The passive voice is called this way to differentiate it from the “active voice”, which is the way we speak almost all the time.

For example:

- I talk about many things. Subject (I) + verb (talk about) + object (many things).

As you can observe, in the “active voice”, the subject is a person = I

But if I say:

- Many things **are being talked** about. *Se habla de muchas cosas*

Then the subject is not a “person” anymore but rather “many things”. Another difference is that the verb tense consists of two verbs:

“Being (-ing form of the verb “to be”) + talked (past participle of the verb “talk”)

So we can conclude that the passive voice is a way of speaking in which the subject is usually an object (thing), or is unknown and the verb is formed by the verb “to be” (conjugated in accordance with the tense in which we are speaking: being, was, were, been, being) + the past participle of the main verb.

Passive voice with “get”

The passive voice can also be made with “get”. **Note:** It is most commonly used in American English.

Examples:

- I **get paid** every month- *Me pagan todos los meses.*
- When are they going to **get married**? *¿Cuándo se casarán?*
- He **got picked up** at the office. *Le recogieron en la oficina.*
- He **didn't get picked up** at the office. No le recogieron en la oficina. **Note:** In the negative form we must add “do/does” for the present tense and “did” for the past tense.

In this case the structure is “get” + “past participle of the main verb” or “get” + “adjective”.

Please, check this list of idiomatic expressions with “get” that are considered passive voice.

- Get married - *Casarse*
- Get divorced - *Divorciarse*
- Get engaged - *Comprometerse (para casarse)*
- Get dressed - *Vestirse*
- Get washed- *Lavarse*
- Get started - *Empezar*
- Get mixed up- *Confundirse*
- Get fired - (Amer) *Despedir a alguien*
- Get sacked - (Brit) *Despedir a alguien*
- Get drunk - *Emborracharse*
- Get caught- *Ser pillado*
- Get lost- *Perderse*

Notice that in most cases these verbs are translated into Spanish as a reflexive form ending in -se; casar**se**, confundir**se**.



Sometimes “get + adjective” is not a passive voice.

Example:

- Get ready- *Prepárate*. “ready” is not a past participle. It’s an adjective.

Sometimes “get + adjective” is not considered a true passive because the subject does the action.

Examples:

- She got upset – *Se disgustó*
- She got angry – *Se enfadó*.

Notice that in these cases, the subject does the action. There is no third person involved.

What is the difference between the passive voice with “to be” and the passive voice with “get”?

“To be” indicates “state” (*estado*) most of the time and “get” indicates “action” (*proceso*) or a “change of state” (*cambio de estado*).

That is why the verb “to be” is used to talk about a state or longer and more planned actions, and “get” is used, for shorter and less planned actions, sometimes accidents or incidents.

Compare:

- The glass **was broken** (state)- *El vaso fue/estaba roto*.
- The glass **got broken** (action)- *Rompieron el vaso-No hay traducción a la forma pasiva*.
- The house **was built** many years ago (state)- *La casa se construyó hace muchos años*.
- The house ~~got built~~ many years ago (not possible)

A reflexive pronoun after “get” indicates that the recipient is somehow involved in the result of the action. The reflexive pronouns are: myself, yourself, him/herself, itself, ourselves, and themselves.

Compare:

- I **got injured** while cleaning the machine. *Me hice daño mientras limpiaba la máquina.* I wasn't involved in the result.
- I **got myself injured** while cleaning the machine. *Me hice daño mientras limpiaba la máquina (y fue por mi culpa).* I was involved in the result.

Learning to turn the active voice into a passive voice

Let's continue comparing the active and the passive voice so that you get used to the change of tenses.

- She filled **the studio** with an intense smell of roses. (active)
- **The studio** **was filled** with the intense smell of roses. (passive) **Notice:** We don't know who (meaning "what person") filled the studio with the intense smell of roses. (Chap. 1)

- I finished **it**. (active)
- **It** **is finished**. (passive) (Chap. 2)

- She prepared **everything** (active)
- **Everything** **is prepared** (passive) (Chap. 5)

Notice how in all these examples the "object" (in blue) of the active sentence, becomes the "subject" of the passive sentence.

When and why do we use the passive voice?

The passive voice is mainly used when we don't want to mention the subject. We do this either because we don't know who the subject is or because we'd rather give more relevance to the object or the result of the action than to the subject.

For example:

- The house **was broken into**. *Entraron a robar en la casa.*

I have chosen the passive voice because I don't know who broke into the house. In other words, I don't know who the thieves are.

- The house **was built** in 1909. *La casa se construyó en 1909.*

I have chosen the passive voice because it's not important to mention "who" built the house. Instead, it's more important to mention that the house was built on a specific date.

What is the structure of the passive voice?

Study the following table, paying special attention to the transformation of the "active verb" into the "passive verb" in each tense. You'll see that to master the passive voice you need a good command of the verb to be.

Tense		Subject	Verb	Object
Simple Present Tense	Active	Harry	talks about	many things
	Passive	Many things	are talked about	by Harry (*)
	Passive with get	Many things	get talked about	
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	son habladas	por Harry (**)
Simple Past	Active	Harry	talked about	many things
	Passive	Many things	were talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	fueron habladas	por Harry
Present Continuous	Active	Harry	is talking about	many things
	Passive	Many things	are being talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	están siendo habladas	por Harry
Past Continuous	Active	Harry	was talking about	many things
	Passive	Many things	were being about	by Harry
Present Perfect	Active	Harry	has talked about	many things
	Passive	Many things	have been talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	han sido habladas	por Harry
Past Perfect	Active	Harry	had talked about	many things
	Passive	many things	had been talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	habían sido habladas	por Harry
Future I	Active	Harry	will talk about	many things
	Passive	Many things	will be talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	serán habladas	por Harry
Future II	Active	Harry	will have talked about	many things
	Passive	Many things	will have been talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	habrán sido habladas	por Harry
Second Conditional	Active	Harry	would talk about	many things
	Passive	Many things	would be talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	serían habladas	por Harry
Third Conditional	Active	Harry	would have talked about	many things
	Passive	Many things	would have been talked about	by Harry
	Spanish	Muchas cosas	habrían sido habladas	por Harry

(*) Usually the "by object" is dropped.



(**) Notice that the translation into Spanish sounds very unnatural as the passive voice is not as common as in English.

Personal and impersonal passive voice

So far we have been reviewing “personal passive voice” that is a passive voice in which the subject is the object.

Example:

- The glasses (object that acts like a subject) are being made. *Los vasos están fabricándose.*

This is the most common kind of passive voice in English.

However, there is also an “impersonal passive voice”. In this case, the subject is not the object, but rather the subject is “it”.

Example:

- **It is said** that they were drunk. *Se dice que ellos estaban borrachos.*
- **It has been known** for years that rosemary is good for memory. *Se sabe desde hace muchos años que el romero es bueno para la memoria.*
- **It is done** like this. *Se hace así.*

This kind of passive voice is usually formed with verbs of perception such as think, say, and know. But, as you can see, it can also be formed with “do”.

Notice that the translation into Spanish is on many occasions in the active voice or in structures with “se” + verb.

Listen and repeat the following sentences.

Spanish	English	Phonetics	Approximate Pronunciation
Solo hay una cosa peor a que hablen de uno; que no hablen	There is only one thing worse than being talked about and that is not being talked about (Chap. 1)	ðə z 'əʊnli wʌn 'θɪŋ wɜːs ðən 'biːɪŋ 'tɔːkt ə'baʊt ənd ðət s nɒt 'biːɪŋ 'tɔːkt ə'baʊt	Der iss ónli wuan zing wours dan biing tokt ábaut and dats not biing tokt ábaut
El estudio estaba lleno de un fuerte olor a rosas	The studio was filled with the intense smell of roses (Chap. 1)	ðə 'stjuːdiəʊ wəz fɪld wɪð ði ɪn'tens smel əv 'rəʊzɪz	De sstúdio wuass fild wuiz de ɪn'tens smel of róussess

Está terminado (una cosa)	It is finished (Chap 2)	ɪt s 'fɪnɪʃt	Its fínishd
Ella se llamaba Victoria	She was called Victoria (Chap. 4)	ʃi wəz kɔ:ld vɪk'tɔ:riə	Shí wuás kold vik'toria
Anunciaba (la carta) que se iba a casar con Sybil Vane	It announced that he was going to marry Sybil Vane (Chap. 4)	ɪt ə'naʊnst ðət hi wəz 'gəʊɪŋ tə 'mæri sɪbɪl veɪn	It a'naunsd dat he wuás going to méri síbil véin
La habían entregado (la carta) en mano esa mañana.	It had been delivered by hand that morning. (Chap. 8)	ɪt həd bi:n dɪ'livəd baɪ hænd ðət 'mɔ:nɪŋ	It had bin de'liverd báí hand dat mórning
Ellos no creían las cosas malas que se decían sobre él.	They didn't believe the bad things that were said about him (chap. 10)	'ðeɪ 'dɪdnt bɪ'li:v ðə bæd 'θɪŋz ðət wə 'sed ə'baʊt ɪm	Déi didnt bílivde bad zíngs dát wuéér sed ábut him
La mesa estaba decorada.	The table was decorated (Chap. 10)	ðə 'teɪbl wəz 'dekəreɪtɪd	De téibol wuás dékoreitid
Lord Henry Wotton había sido invitado también,	Lord Henry Wotton had also been invited (chap 14)	lɔ:d 'henri 'wɔ:tən həd 'ɔ:lsəʊ bi:n ɪn'vaɪtɪd	Lord hénri wuótón had olso bin in'vaitid
Todos los buenos sombreros son hechos de nada.	All good hats are made of nothing (Chap. 16)	ɔ:l gud hæts ə 'meɪd əv 'nʌθɪŋ	Ol gud hats ar méid of názing

To sum up:

The passive voice is a way of speaking in which the subject is usually the object of the verb or the person doing the action is unknown. When we want to include the “agent” (the person doing the action) we use the preposition “by”. The verb is formed by the verb “to be” (conjugated in accordance with the tense in which we are speaking: being, was, were, been, being) + the past participle of the main verb.

Examples:

-**It is said**- *Se dice*

-The school **was being built**. *El colegio estaba siendo construido.*

The passive voice can also be made with “**get**”.

Examples:

-The door didn't **get fixed**. *La puerta no se arregló.*

-The chicken **got fed** yesterday. *Los pollos fueron alimentados ayer.*



Homework:

1. Look for the passive voice with “get” throughout the audiobook.
2. Translate the following sentences; the answers are at the end. Once you have corrected them, please put them in IVONA or similar software and repeat them aloud:

1. La secuestraron la semana pasada.
2. Se sabe que no son de verdad
3. La puerta está siendo arreglada
4. Se prohíbe fumar
5. No se sabe si había sido escrita por ella
6. Se tratarán muchos temas en la reunión de la semana que viene
7. Ellas fueron vistas el sábado pasado.
8. Se decían muchas cosas malas sobre él
9. Se anunció su (de él) boda ayer
10. El paquete fue entregado en mano esta mañana
11. Creo que habría sido descubierto si hubieran trabajado más duro.

Answers:

1. She was kidnapped last week
2. It is known that they are not real
3. The door is being fixed/ The door is getting fixed
4. Smoking is not allowed/ is forbidden
5. It is not known if it had been written by her
6. Many subjects will be dealt with in the meeting next week
7. They were seen last Saturday
8. Many bad things were said about him
9. His wedding was announced yesterday
10. The packet (package Amer.) was delivered by hand this morning.
11. I think it would have been found out if they had worked harder.