

25 The passive in the past

English uses the passive voice in the past to stress the effect of an action that happened in the past, rather than the cause of that action.

See also:

Past simple **7** Past continuous **10**
Present perfect **11** Past perfect **13**

25.1 THE PAST SIMPLE PASSIVE

The past simple passive is used when referring to a single completed action in the past, focusing on the effect rather than the cause.



PAST SIMPLE

The fire **destroyed** the buildings.

PAST SIMPLE PASSIVE

The buildings **were destroyed** by the fire.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

The trees **were cut down** last year.



The rail road **was damaged** during the storm.



Two people **were injured** in the accident.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"WAS / WERE"

PAST PARTICIPLE

REST OF SENTENCE

The buildings

were

destroyed

in a fire.

The thing that receives the action.

"Was" is for singular subjects, and "were" is for plural subjects.

The main verb is a past participle.

25.2 THE PAST CONTINUOUS PASSIVE

The past continuous can also be used in the passive voice. It is used to refer to ongoing actions in the past.



PAST CONTINUOUS

Secret agents **were watching** him.

PAST CONTINUOUS PASSIVE

He **was being watched** by secret agents.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

The students **were being taught** how to write good essays.



By the time I got back to my car, it **was being taken away**.



I went for lunch while my car **was being fixed**.



The new secretary **was being shown** how to use the computer.



We bought our house while it **was being built**.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"WAS / WERE"

"BEING"

PAST PARTICIPLE

"BY" + AGENT

He

was

being

watched

by secret agents.

The thing that receives the action.

"Was" is for singular subjects, and "were" is for plural subjects.

The main verb is expressed as a past participle.

25.3 THE PRESENT PERFECT PASSIVE

The present perfect passive is used to talk about events in the past that still have an effect on the present moment.



PRESENT PERFECT

Don't worry, I **have fed** the cats.

PRESENT PERFECT PASSIVE

Don't worry, the cats **have been fed**.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

This door **has been painted** beautifully.



Do you know if all the lights **have been turned off**?



Has your computer been fixed yet? It broke months ago!



The subject and verb swap places to form questions.

The new parts **haven't been delivered** yet, so you'll have to wait.



All of the smoke detectors **have been replaced**.



HOW TO FORM

SUBJECT

"HAS / HAVE"

"BEEN"

PAST PARTICIPLE

The cats

have

been

fed.

The thing that receives the action.

"Been" stays the same no matter what the subject is.

The main verb is expressed as a past participle.

25.4 THE PAST PERFECT PASSIVE

The past perfect passive is used to refer to events that happened before another event in the past.



Unfortunately, the organizer **had canceled** the party.

PAST PERFECT

PAST PERFECT PASSIVE

Unfortunately, the party **had been canceled**.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

This part of the Arctic **had never been explored** before.



The class **hadn't been told** that the lecture **had been canceled**.



Sue didn't realize that the floor **had just been polished**.



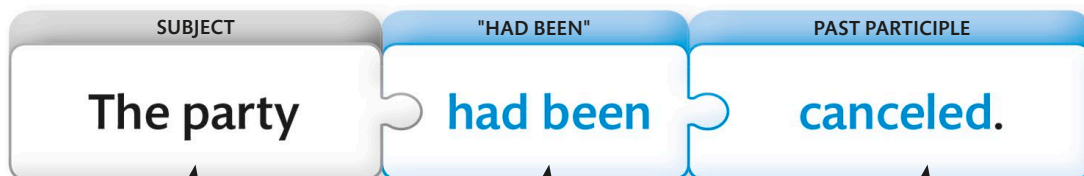
We were about to sing *Happy Birthday*, but the cake **had been eaten**!



Anna was so happy that her cat **had been found**.



HOW TO FORM



The thing that receives the action.

"Had been" stays the same with any subject.

The main verb is expressed as a past participle.