

## The Passive<sup>1</sup>

Using the passive enables us to talk about an action without mentioning who is doing it - it places the emphasis on the action itself, rather than the agent who is performing it. There are two passives in German: the *werden*-passive and the *sein*-passive.

### 1. The *werden*-passive

This is the more common passive in German. It is used to describe a process, ie "Das Buch wird gelesen"(= the book is being read).

#### a. The *werden*-passive with transitive verbs

The *werden*-passive can be formed from most transitive verbs (those which take a direct object in the accusative). For exceptions, see section 3.

The direct object of the active verb becomes the subject of the passive construction. The passive construction is formed using the auxiliary verb *werden* (in the appropriate tense) and the past participle of the main verb:

<i>Meine Mutter <b>unterrichtet</b> die Kinder</i>	<i>Die Kinder <b>werden</b> unterrichtet</i>
My mother teaches/is teaching the children	The children are /are being taught

<i>Die Arbeiter <b>unterschrieben</b> den Vertrag</i>	<i>Der Vertrag <b>wurde</b> unterschrieben</i>
The workers signed the contract	The contract was signed

In the perfect and pluperfect tenses *worden* is used instead of *geworden*:

*Das Haus **ist verkauft worden***  
The house has been sold

*Wir **waren gewarnt worden***  
We had been warned

The subject of the active verb can be inserted into the passive construction using *von* + dative:

*Ich **war von meinem Onkel gewarnt worden***  
I had been warned by my uncle

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<sup>1</sup> These notes are adapted from Martin Durrell, *Hammer's German Grammar and Usage*, 3rd ed. (London: Arnold, 1996).

## b. The *werden*-passive with intransitive verbs

Only the accusative object of an active verb can become the subject of the corresponding passive construction. If a verb governing a dative, genitive or prepositional object is used in the passive, then these objects remain in their original case. If the active verb does not take a direct object in the accusative, a third-person singular form of *werden* is used:

*Sie dankten ihm für seine Hilfe*  
They thanked him for his help

*Ihm wurde für seine Hilfe gedankt*  
He was thanked for his help

*Wir gedachten der Toten*  
We remembered the dead

*Der Toten wurde gedacht*  
The dead were remembered

*Wir reden viel über sie*  
We talk about her a lot

*Über sie wird viel geredet*  
She is talked about a lot

The pronoun *es* is inserted if no other element (eg the object or an adverbial) comes before the verb in a main clause:

*Es wurde mir gesagt, dass ich nicht depressiv wirke*  
I was told that I don't seem depressed

*Es wird für die Kinder gesorgt*  
The children are being taken care of

With verbs which take a direct object and a dative object, the dative object must remain in the dative in the passive. *Werden* agrees with the subject of the passive construction (the direct object of the active phrase):

*Ihm waren 1000 Euro versprochen worden*  
He had been promised 1000 euros

*Den Kindern wurde viel Freiheit gegeben.*  
The children were given lots of freedom

## 2. The *sein*-passive

The *sein*-passive indicates the *state* which the subject of the verb is in as a result of a previous action. It is formed using the auxiliary verb *sein* and the past-participle of the main verb:

*Der Tisch ist gedeckt*  
The table is laid (i.e. someone has already laid it)

*Das Pferd ist an den Baum gebunden*

The horse is tied to the tree (i.e. someone has tied the horse to a tree).

As with the *werden*-passive, only the accusative object of a transitive verb can become the subject of a *sein*-passive. Verbs which take a dative, genitive or prepositional object are handled in the same way as for the *werden*-passive.

### **3. Transitive verbs which cannot be used in the passive**

No passive is possible in German with verbs of knowing, containing, possessing and receiving, i.e. *bekommen*, *besitzen*, *enthalten*, *erhalten*, *haben*, *kennen*, *kriegen*, *umfassen*, *wissen*. Instead, active forms of another verb or a construction with *man* are used:

*Wir besitzen das Haus => Das Haus gehört uns*

We own the house                      The house is owned by us

*Wir erhielten den Brief gestern => Der Brief traf gestern ein*

We received the letter yesterday      The letter was received yesterday

*Sie wussten nicht, wie viele Kinder kommen würden*

They didn't know how many children would come

*=> Man wusste nicht, wie viele Kinder kommen würden*

It was not known how many children would come

No passive is possible in German with verbs of perception followed by a bare infinitive. Instead, alternative constructions - usually in the active voice - are used, e.g.:

*Man sah sie spielen*

She was seen playing