Das Passiv: Erklärung

The Passive Voice in English

Like German, English has both an active and a passive voice. In the normal active voice, the subject of the sentence acts upon or interacts with an object: She sees him. Both German and English offer an alternative verb structure, the passive voice, in which the subject of the sentence receives the action: He is seen by her. To transform the active to the passive, we turn the direct object “him” into the grammatical subject “he” and place it in the customary first position. The active verb (“sees”) becomes the past participle (“seen”), and - in English - “to be” is inserted as the auxiliary verb: thus She sees him becomes He is seen.

One purpose of the passive voice is avoid identifying the active subject - Mistakes were made - but if we do want to retain that information, we put it into a prepositional phrase: Mistakes were made by the leaders.

The Passive Voice in German

German uses a very similar structure for the passive: the important difference is that instead of ‘is’ (to be) as the auxiliary verb, German forms the passive with werden. Like in English, the accusative direct object of an active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence (him becomes he, ihn becomes er). The past participle (‘seen’ in our examples above) is the past participle in German as well.

Sie sieht ihn. ➤ Er wird gesehen.

If we still want to identify the agent (he is seen by her), we put the information into a prepositional phrase, usually with von -- which of course takes the dative case: Er wird von ihr gesehen.

Note: The preposition durch can be used when the active subject is an instrument (a thing or cause) of the action, rather than an initiator (person): Berlin wird durch eine Mauer geteilt. Of course durch takes the accusative, as always. And like the English “with,” mit can be used to indicate a tool used to carry out the action: Die Tür wird mit einem Schlüssel geöffnet. The most common sentences, though, and the ones we will be practicing most, are those with a von-agent.

The Passive Voice with Verbs That Take the Dative Case

Verbs that take the dative case, even when a direct action is implied, require a different structure than normal accusative verbs. This structure doesn't have an English equivalent -- which means you'll need to watch out for dative verbs, since your instinct won't tell you to do anything differently. Remember that with normal verbs we move the direct object into the subject position and make it nominative. Since dative verbs do not have accusative direct objects, there is nothing to move to the subject position! We must keep the dative object in the dative case, but carry on making a passive sentence with werden + past participle. There are two equally common structures for the passive with dative verbs:

Sie hilft mir. ➤ Mir wird (von ihr) geholfen.
(oder:) ➤ Es wird mir (von ihr) geholfen.

Note that even in the first variant, mir is not the grammatical subject; there is an understood es that functions as a dummy subject. With dative verbs, even when the object is plural, the verb will always be singular (in other words, the subject is always es, even when es is not explicitly stated):

Sie hilft den Leuten. ➤ Den Leuten wird geholfen.
(oder:) ➤ Es wird den Leuten geholfen.

Tenses in the Passive Voice

In English, we change tenses in the passive by changing the auxiliary verb “to be” -- he is seen, he was seen, he will be seen, etc. The same is true in German: to change tenses, simply change the verb werden. The only unusual element comes in the past participle in the perfect tense: instead of the expected “geworden”, we use just “worden”. (We will be practicing this tense later, so don't worry too much about it for now.) The most common passive tenses, and the ones you need to be very comfortable with, are the present and simple past.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>German (present)</th>
<th>English (present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Präsen (present)</td>
<td>Du wirst gesehen.</td>
<td>You are seen / You are being seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Präteritum (simple past):</td>
<td>Du wurdest gesehen.</td>
<td>You were seen / You were being seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfekt (present perfect):</td>
<td>Du bist gesehen worden.</td>
<td>You have been.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futur (future):</td>
<td>Du wirst gesehen worden.</td>
<td>You will be seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Präsen mit Modalverb (present with modal):</td>
<td>Du kannst gesehen werden.</td>
<td>You can be seen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Präteritum mit Modalverb (past with modal verb):</td>
<td>Du konntest gesehen werden.</td>
<td>You could be seen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Passive in three easy steps:

1. The **accusative object** of the original active sentence becomes the **subject** of the passive sentence -- and changes to the **nominative** case accordingly. The original subject of the active sentence (the agent) doesn't need to be stated in the passive version (often, that's the point of the passive), but if you need to, you can state it by inserting *von* + dative. All other nouns and pronouns remain unchanged: in particular, **dative objects remain dative**. If there is no accusative object, you can use a dummy "es" as the subject, or simply leave the subject slot empty (filling it with an object or adverb).

2. Change the main verb into the **past participle** (ge- form)! Doing otherwise makes a completely different sentence with a very different meaning. Every passive sentence in every tense in German (and English) has a past participle of the main verb.

3. Use the **correct form of werden** as the auxiliary (conjugated) verb, and decide on which tense of werden to use.

Aspects of the Passive Unique to German

Occasionally, German uses the passive voice in ways that English cannot. Since these don't translate directly into English, they may be hard for you to grasp, but rest assured that we will practice these idiosyncrasies in class.

**The introductory es**

*Es* is often used to begin a passive main clause, even when it is not the subject.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Es werden heute viele Häuser aus Holz gebaut.} & \quad \text{Many houses are built of wood today.} \\
\text{Heute werden viele Häuser aus Holz gebaut.} & \quad \text{Today many houses are built of wood.}
\end{align*}
\]

Note that *viele Häuser* is the actual subject of that sentence (and thus *werden* agrees with that plural subject). *Es* is merely a placeholder, and plays no grammatical role. If any other element is moved to the first position, the *es* disappears:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wir liefen zum Markt.} & \quad \text{Es würde zum Markt gelaufen.} & \quad \text{We walked to the store.} \\
\text{Wir liefen zum Markt.} & \quad \text{(no direct translation!)}
\end{align*}
\]

**The impersonal passive**

**UNLIKE ENGLISH**, German can take an intransitive verb -- a verb that has no direct object at all -- and turn it into a passive sentence. There is absolutely no way of doing this in English. If you have the sentence "We walked to the store" you cannot put it into the passive in English ('to the store was walked' doesn't make any sense). In German, you can, and you do -- often. You merely use the dummy *es* as the subject, and the rest of the rules for passive constructions apply:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wir liefen zum Markt.} & \quad \text{Es würde zum Markt gelaufen.} & \quad \text{We walked to the store.} \\
\text{We walked to the store.} & \quad \text{(no direct translation!)}
\end{align*}
\]

This use of the passive (called the impersonal passive, since there's no 'person' specified) is very common in German, and is used to denote general activity. To indicate that "There is dancing going on at the party" for instance, Germans will say:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Man tanzt auf der Party.} & \quad \text{Es wird auf der Party getanzt.}
\end{align*}
\]

Other common examples of the impersonal passive:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Es wird geklatscht.} & \quad \text{People are chatting; there is chatting going on.} \\
\text{Bei uns zu Hause wird viel gelacht.} & \quad \text{At our house there's a lot of laughing.} \\
\text{Hier wird oft geraucht.} & \quad \text{There's often smoking done here; people smoke a lot here.}
\end{align*}
\]