

# “To Be” Verbs and Passive Voice

## What is a “to be” verb?

- A verb that is used in a number of ways in the English language, including linking, passive construction, and auxiliary
- Has many forms, including *is, am, are, was, were, be, being, and been*

# How are they used?

- Present Tense:
  - I am/we are
  - You are
  - He, she, it is/they are
- Past Tense:
  - I was/we were
  - You were
  - He, she, it was/they were

## How are they used? (cont.)

- Perfect form:
  - I, you, they, we have been
- Progressive form:
  - I am being, they are being, etc.

# Linking Verbs

- “To be” verbs are used as **linking verbs** to describe the role or description of the subject. They are called this because they link the subject and the subject complement.
  - Examples:  
The cat **is** black.
  - They **are** late to the party.
  - He **was** not very happy.
  - Driving a car **is** faster than walking.

## Now you try!

- Create a sentence that describes something with a linking verb.

# Auxiliary verbs

- Used with progressive and progressive perfect tenses
  - Present progressive: The dog **is** barking.
  - Past progressive: The dog **was** barking.
  - Future progressive: The dog **will be** barking.
  - Present perfect progressive: The dog **has been** barking for five minutes.
  - Past perfect progressive: The dog **had been** barking when I got home.
  - Future perfect progressive: The dog **will have been** barking for 20 minutes by the time I finish this workshop!

## For more information...

- See the PowerPoint on Verb Tenses on the Writing Center website.

## Now you try!

- Create a sentence with a progressive tense and an auxiliary verb.

# Passive Voice

- Passive voice occurs with the emphasis is placed on the object of the action rather than the subject.
  - Example:
    - Active voice: The **boy** threw the ball.
    - Passive voice: The **ball** was thrown.

# Why use passive voice?

- The actor is unknown:
  - The cave paintings of Lascaux were made in the Upper Old Stone Age. [We don't know who made them.]
- The actor is irrelevant:
  - An experimental solar power plant will be built in the Australian desert. [We are not interested in who is building it.]
- You want to be vague about who is responsible:
  - Mistakes were made. [Common in bureaucratic writing!]

## Why use passive voice? (cont.)

- You are talking about a general truth:
  - Rules are made to be broken. [By whomever, whenever.]
- You want to emphasize the person or thing acted on. For example, it may be your main topic:
  - Insulin was first discovered in 1921 by researchers at the University of Toronto. It is still the only treatment available for diabetes.
- You are writing in a scientific genre that traditionally relies on passive voice. Passive voice is often preferred in lab reports and scientific research papers, most notably in the Materials and Methods section:
  - The sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water. This solution was then titrated with hydrochloric acid. (Corson, Tim and Rebecca Smollett)

## “To Be” verbs used with passive voice

- When using to be verbs with passive voice, they are used similarly to linking and auxiliary verbs.
- Passive sentences are constructed as follows:
  - [thing receiving action] + [to be verb] + [past participle of verb]+[by] + [thing doing action] (“Active/Passive Verb Forms”).

# Examples

- Present progressive tense: “The sweater **is** being knit by the girl.”
- Simple past: “The sweater **was** knit by the girl.”
- Simple past, plural: “The pies **were** made by different people.”

# Now you try!

- Create a sentence in the passive voice.

## Works Cited

Corson, Tim and Rebecca Smollett. "Passive Voice: When To Use It and When To Avoid It." *University College Writing Centre*. University of Toronto, n.d. Web. 12 Nov, 2014.

"Active/Passive Verb Forms." *Englishpage.com*. Language Dynamics, n.d. Web. 12 Nov, 2014.