

### Passive Voice

A **passive** sentence is always a variant of some **active** sentence. Contrast:

Active: The people built the cathedral in 1356.

Passive: The cathedral was built (by the people) in 1356.

An advantage of the passive is that one need not state the subject of the verb, whereas the active sentence must always include this. Contrast:

Active: I made a mistake. (Aha! So it was you!)

Passive: A mistake was made. (Yeah, but by whom?)

- 1. Normally the passive in German is formed by using a form of **werden** as an auxiliary with the past participle:

**Ein Fehler wurde gemacht.** A mistake was made.

Note that the English passive above uses a form of the verb *to be* plus the past participle.

- 2. The six tenses of the passive indicative are derived from the tense of **werden**:

Present        **Fehler werden gemacht.**        Mistakes are (being) made

Imperfect     **Fehler wurden gemacht.**        Mistakes were (being) made.

Future        **Fehler werden gemacht werden.**    Mistakes will be made.

Pres. Perf.    **Fehler sind gemacht worden.**       Mistakes have been made.

Past Perf.     **Fehler waren gemacht worden.**     Mistakes had been made.

Fut. Perf      **Fehler werden gemacht worden sein.**    Mistakes will have been made.

Note that **worden** replaces **geworden** in the perfect system.

- 3. When a modal auxiliary is involved, one uses the **passive infinitive** instead of the active. The passive infinitive is simply **werden** + past participle:

**gemacht (zu) werden**        to be done/made

Present: **Fehler können gemacht werden.**    Mistakes can be made.

Past: **Fehler konnten gemacht werden.**       Mistakes could be made.

Although other tenses can be formed, they are very rare, so we won't bother with:

**Fehler haben gemacht werden können.** Mistakes have been able to be made. (!)

- 4. It is possible to have subjunctive passives, but they, too are rare.

Example: **Wenn der Fehler nur nicht gemacht worden wäre!**

If only the mistake hadn't been made!

Consider this monstrosity: **Wenn ich nur hätte von ihr geküsst werden können!**

If only I could have been kissed by her!

- 5. You will have noticed that the direct object of an active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence: I hit the ball becomes The ball was hit (by me). The subject of the active sentence can be left out entirely: the ball was hit, or expressed by a prepositional phrase: the ball was hit by me. In German the preposition is **von**, if the agent is animate, or **durch**, if the agent is inanimate:

Die Stadt wurde **von** den Römern zerstört. The city was destroyed by the Romans.

Die Stadt wurde **durch** Feuer zerstört. The city was destroyed by fire.

- 6. If the object of the active sentence is in the dative, i.e. an indirect object, it remains in the dative in the passive sentence, and the subject becomes the singular pronoun **es**.

The **es** is normally eliminated by starting the sentence with the dative object:

Active: Ich gab **ihm** ein Buch.        I gave him a book.

Passive: **Ihm** wurde ein Buch gegeben.        He was given a book.

Note that there is no dative/accusative distinction in English, hence the translation above.

Note also that the subject is the singular **es** even when the dative object is plural:

**Ihnen** wurde Bücher gegeben.        They were given books.

- 7. A passive verb with **es** as the subject is often used to express a general activity, or an activity in which the agent is unknown:

**Es wird heute abend hier getanzt.** There's a dance here tonight.

**Es wurde bei uns eingebrochen.** There was a break-in at our place.

As in 6. above, the **es** disappears if you start the sentence with some other word:

**Hier wird heute abend getanzt.**

**Bei uns wurde eingebrochen.**

- 8. Since in German the past participle is, strictly speaking, an adjective (as are all participles), past participles can occur after the verb **sein** just as any other adjective: **Das Haus ist weiß. Das Haus ist klein. Das Haus ist verkauft** (sold).

In the last sentence we must be careful to distinguish the **false** passive from the **true** passive. The false passive implies a condition, whereas the true passive indicates that a change is taking/has taken place:

False passive: **Das Haus ist verkauft.** Condition - the house is no longer for sale.

True passive: **Das Haus wird verkauft.** Change - someone is selling the house.

### Express in German

1. Our house is sold.
2. Our house is being sold.
3. Our house has been sold.
4. Our house had been sold.
5. Our house will be sold.
6. Can our house be sold?
7. Could our house be sold?
8. Is the car repaired yet? [reparieren]
9. Is the car being repaired?
10. Has the car been repaired?
11. Can the car be repaired?
12. They are being helped by the teachers.
13. They have been helped by the teachers.
14. There's a lot of drinking here.