

# Chapter 18

**RULE 1:** The passive voice turns the action of a verb form back on the subject (or thing modified).

**RULE 2:** Latin uses *-r-* is the most common indicator of the passive voice in present tenses.

**RULE 3:** Passive verb forms expect agents (instead of direct objects).

## I. Grammar

In the next two chapters students will nearly double the number of verb forms they know. This will cause many of them some stress, so it's important to be patient with them. Moreover, most of them probably have yet to hear the word "passive" used in a grammatical sense, so you will, no doubt, have to explain the concept and formation of the passive several times in class and during office hours. It will help to have scores of examples at your fingertips. By working through the explanation of passives in clear, systematic steps, building carefully from English to Latin, you can compensate quickly for their lack of training in grammar and simultaneously secure the Latin forms in their minds.

### A. The English Passive Voice

Explain first in English what a passive verb is. Note that in English most passive forms utilize a form of the verb "to be"—not all do, however, such as the English passive participle, e.g. "praised"—at the same time, however, the presence of a form of "to be" in a verb does not necessarily signify the passive voice, e.g. "I am praising." Contrast passives to actives and give a plethora of examples, focusing especially on the active versus the passive in English continuals: ***I am praising*** vs. ***I am praised***. Appeal to your students' common sense. Make them ask themselves if the subject is acting (active) or being acted upon (passive).

At this point I introduce the concept of "(personal) agent" because it can help students test whether a form is active or passive. I tell them that, if they can say "by the teacher" (meaning that the teacher did it) after a verb form and have it make sense, then the form is passive, e.g. ***I am praised by the teacher*** vs. ***I am praising "by the teacher"*** (which makes no sense). Conversely, if they can add a direct object, the verb form is active, e.g. ***I am praising the teacher***, whereas direct objects make no sense after passive forms, ***I am praised "the teacher."***

### B. The Formation of the Passive Voice in Latin

It will come as a shock to many of your students that the Latin present-tense system forms passives by changing the personal ending of the verb rather than by adding a form of "to be" as English does. Therefore, guide students through this step slowly and carefully. Explain that the verb endings tell not only the person and number of the verb but also the voice. Although they haven't been told so before, all the forms that the students have learned so far are active. Now they are learning the passive equivalents of the active forms they already know.

Put the new endings on the board and point out that all but one has a distinctive passive marker *-r-*, clearly a signal to the Roman ear that a present-tense form is passive in voice (for *-mini*, see below). Demonstrate how each ending attaches to the verb base in the present tenses. Ask students to translate the passive forms you make. Show how tense signs are added to passive forms in the same way as they are with active forms (n.b. the exception *-beris*). You should also note that the second-person singular ending *-ris* has an alternate form, *-re*, which creates a passive form identical to the active infinitive. Context will determine whether a main verb or an infinitive is required.

Counter to Wheelock's separation of third-, third *-io* and fourth-conjugation passive forms (Chapter 21) from the first and second conjugations (Chapter 18), I prefer to teach all present passive forms at once. This both provides a coherent overview of all present passive forms and allows Chapter 21 to serve as a review with little new material added.

Finally point out the passive infinitive endings, *-ari* and *-eri*—and *-i* and *-iri*, if you are introducing third-fourth conjugation passives in this chapter—which differ from active infinitives only slightly in formation but greatly in meaning and syntactic expectation.

### C. Syntax: Agents

At this point, it's wise to recapitulate what you said at the outset about syntax—in general, you'll find that you may need to explain the syntax of passive forms more than once—active verbs as a rule take direct objects, but passive verbs do not. That is, "I praise" can take after it an accusative direct object: "I praise *my teacher*." But the passive form of the verb "I am praised" cannot take a direct object—hence, no accusatives after true passives (ignore deponents for the time being)—rather, they expect an "agent," saying by whom the action was done: "I am praised *by my teacher*."

Latin uses the ablative case to express agent and makes a distinction which English does not: if the agent in Latin is a person, "by" is expressed by the preposition *a/ab* + an ablative object and the construction is called "personal agent." If, however, the agent is not a person, the ablative case is still used but without *a/ab* and the construction is called "means" (or "impersonal agent"). I require my students to use the term "personal agent" when the ablative is used to express the agent after a passive voice, because in this way I know that they have recognized that the ablative represents the "actor" of the passive verb form.

### D. Worksheet

Go carefully through the examples in Wheelock on the bottom of page 85. But since these examples may not be sufficient to drill students on such an important concept, click [here](#) for a worksheet on the formation and usage of passive verb forms in the present-tense verb system.

### E. History of the Present Passive System

Indo-European had two voices: active and medio-passive. The medio-passive voice covered actions both done by the subject in its own interest and done to the subject by an outside influence. Latin came to use the medio-passive voice mainly in a passive sense, whereas Greek retained the original middle sense of this voice. In general, Indo-European languages exhibit a wide range of forms used in making "true" passives (i.e. ones distinct from middle forms), and this is taken as evidence that "true" passives developed only after Indo-European had broken up into different language families.

Latin, for instance, developed an *-r-* passive marker, possibly equivalent to the impersonal *-r* found in Osco-Umbrian, e.g. *ferar* = "there must be a carrying, one should carry." Thus, it seems likely that the Latin passive endings in part derive from the original Indo-European medio-passive endings and in part are the Romans' independent creation.

The Indo-European medio-passive endings were:

Person	Singular		Plural	
	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	
First Person	<i>-ai</i>	<i>-i</i>	<i>-medhai</i>	<i>-medhe</i>
Second Person	<i>-sai</i>	<i>-so, -thes(?)</i>	?	?
Third Person	<i>-tai</i>	<i>-to</i>	<i>-ntai</i>	<i>-nto</i>

**1s.** The passive marker *-r-* was either added directly to the active ending *-ô* or substituted for *-m*.

**2s.** Neither of the second-person endings used *-r-* to create its passive ending. The *-r-* in *-ris* derives from the original secondary ending *-so* rhotacized to *\*-ro* and then *-re*. To *-re*, *-s* was added by analogy to the active second-person ending, and *-res* became, as expected, *-ris*; so *-re* is not a contraction of *-ris* but, in fact, predates it.

**3s.** Again Latin used the secondary ending. To *-to*, Latin added *-r*: \**-tor* > *-tur*.

**1pl.** *-mur* derives from \**-mor*, in which *-r* is added to the secondary ending.

**2pl.** Linguists offer two explanations for *-minī*, the most unusual of the passive endings in Latin. (1) It may have originated as a middle participle ending *-menoi* (Lat. *-menī*) used in a periphrastic construction with the verb "to be" (cf. Gk. *-menoi este*), which later lost its copula (*este*) and became an ending. (2) It may, on the other hand, have derived from the middle infinitive (cf. Gk. *-menai*), first used imperatively (cf. imperative *sequimini*) and then extended to the indicative. The second seems simpler and more probable.

**3pl.** Secondary *-nto* + *-r* > *-ntur*.

**Infinitive.** There is no satisfactory comprehensive explanation of the Latin passive infinitive. The *-ī* ending seems to have originated as a dative singular ending attached directly to the stem (third conjugation) or an *s*-stem of the verb (cf. the Greek infinitive ending *-saī*) which in Latin would naturally rhotacize and reduce to *-re*. This, however, does not explain how *-ī* came to signify the passive in Latin, and since (as Palmer points out) *-ī* also occurs in *-minī*, it may be that *-ī* was a particle with medio-passive function in proto-Latin. This ending could then have been attached directly to the verb stem to create the infinitive as well as to a *-men-* suffix (which created a verbal noun) to make the imperative (*-minī*) and from there spread to the indicative.

## II. Vocabulary

- **consilium:** A nice opportunity to distinguish the English homonyms, *counsel* and *council*: *counsel* comes from Latin *consilium*; *council* comes from Latin *concilium* (< *cum-* + *calare* = "call together"). Therefore a *counsellor* gives advice to a person (such as a legal client, a student or a camper) and a *council(l)or* serves on a council.
- **genus:** One Latin representative (also *gens*, *gigno*) of an important Indo-European base (\**gen-*) denoting genetic connection or apparent similarity. *Genus* is cognate with English *kin* (Eng. *k* = Lat. *g*, by Grimm's Law). As with the English phrase "by birth," Latin *genus* can mean "origin, class, kind."
- **a/ab:** Takes an **ablative** object. This preposition is the opposite of *ad* with which it is all too easily confused. *A/Ab* has both a literal and a figurative meaning: "away from" (whereas *de* = down from and *e/ex* = out from) versus "by" (= personal agent). [It is cognate with Greek *apo*.]
- **etiam:** = *et* + *iam* (literally "even now/then").
- **lego:** Finally, the base verb of the compounds *intellego* and *neglego*! *Lego* forms its perfect by lengthening the root vowel: *leg-*. The perfect passive *lectum* = *leg-* + *-tum*. From the application of the meaning "choose" to books (or more precisely, scrolls), *lego* came to have the sense "read" (literally, "choose" a scroll). Since reading is a relatively late invention, there is no root in Indo-European for "read" and each daughter language had to invent its own word for the activity of reading. Some are notable, e.g. Greek *anagignoskein*, literally "to know again, recognize (written letters)"; also, English "read", which originally meant "advise, interpret the meaning of (as in the old idiom 'to read tarot cards')," and then came to mean "explain the hidden meaning behind (written letters)," cf. German *raten* ("to advise, guess").
- **moveo:** The perfect, *movī*, is formed by lengthening the root vowel. It replaces the predicted but unpronounceable \**movui*.
- **terreo:** The opposite of *timeo*. Students tend to confuse the meaning of these two verbs. Remind them that *timid* people "fear" and "frightening" people *terrify*. [Like many *-eo* verbs, *terreo* is a causative ("make to . . .") based on the stem \**tre-* (cf. Greek *treo* "flee"), literally "to make tremble, to cause to flee," cf. *moneo* (from \**men-* "to recall"), literally "to cause to recall" > "to warn."]
- **videor:** The passive of *video* has both a literal sense ("be seen") and a figurative one ("seem"). Both senses take a predicate nominative ("be seen as X," "seem [to be] X"). The literal sense, however, can take a personal agent ("be seen by X"), whereas the figurative sense often takes a complementary infinitive ("seem to X"). [English *seem* was originally *beseem*, deriving from the same base as *same* and meaning literally "to appear the same as." *Same* comes from Indo-European \**sem*, rendering in Greek *homo-* and *hen* ("one"), and in Latin *simul* and *similis*.]
- **ludus:** *Ludus* reminds us that school began at recess on the playgrounds of antiquity, intellectual amusement parks like Plato's Academy. The Greek word *scholē* which gives us "school" originally meant "leisure(-time)," a connection that too many students make only after they've gone out into the "real" world and worked at a "real" job for a while.

It's too bad that people can't go to school towards the end of life when they would appreciate it more and see it for the "playtime" it really is.