

The passive voice is used much less in German than in English, but it is used. Active and passive voice forms are not tenses. The active or passive voice can be in the present, past, future or any other tense.

1. To conjugate verbs in the passive voice, you must know the forms of **werden** (to become). German uses **werden** + the past participle, while English uses "to be."
2. A passive voice sentence may or may not include the "agent" (by whom something was done), for example von mir (by me) in this sentence: Der Brief wird von mir geschrieben. | The letter is being written by me.
1. If the agent is a person, it is expressed in German with a **von**-phrase: **von Anna** (by Anna). If the agent is not a person, then a **durch**-phrase is used: **durch den Wind** (by the wind).
2. Only transitive verbs (those that take a direct object) can be made passive. The direct object (accusative case) in the active voice becomes the subject (nominative case) in the passive voice.

Active/Aktiv

- **Der Sturm hat das Haus zerstört.** | **The wind storm destroyed the building.**

Passive/Passiv (no agent expressed)

- Das Haus **ist zerstört worden.** | The building **was destroyed.**

Passive/Passiv (agent expressed)

- Das Haus **ist durch den Sturm zerstört worden.** | The building **was destroyed by the wind storm.**

"False Passive" (predicate adjective)

- Das Haus **ist zerstört.** | The building is destroyed.
- Das Haus **war zerstört.** | The building was destroyed.

Note in the examples above:

1. Except for the last "false passive" example, all the ACTIVE and PASSIVE sentences are in the same tense (present perfect/**Perfekt**).
1. The ACTIVE verb form "hat zerstört" changes to "ist zerstört worden" in the PASSIVE.

2. Although the normal past participle of "werden" is "(ist) geworden," when the past participle is used with another verb, it becomes "ist (zerstört) worden."
3. If the ACTIVE sentence contains a past participle (i.e., "zerstört"), it will also appear, unchanged, in the PASSIVE sentence with "worden."
1. The agent (**der Sturm**) is not a person, so the PASSIVE voice sentence uses **durch** to express "by" — rather than **von**. (Note: In everyday German, this rule is often ignored by native-speakers who may also use **von** for impersonal agents.)
2. The preposition **von** is always dative, while **durch** is always accusative.
3. The "false passive" example is NOT in the passive voice. The past participle "zerstört" is only being used as a predicate adjective, describing the condition of the building ("destroyed").

Vocabulary Note: Although it has little to do with the passive voice, a few vocabulary comments related to the examples above are in order. Besides "house," **das Haus** can also refer to a "building" or structure. Second, although it has several meanings, German **Sturm** usually means a "gale" or a strong wind storm, as in "Sturm und Regen" (wind and rain). Because the two words are similar to English (cognates), it is easy to misunderstand their true meanings in German.

Aus der Zeitung: Some slightly edited passive examples from a German newspaper with the passive verb bolded.

- "Ein neues Einkaufszentrum soll in diesem Sommer **eröffnet werden**." (A new shopping center should be opening this summer.)
- "Er ist zum 'Mr. Germany' **gewählt worden**." (He was chosen 'Mr. Germany'.)
- "Es **wurden** zunächst keine genauen Zahlen **genannt**." (For the time being no exact figures were named/given.)
- "Am Dienstag **wurde** im Berliner Schloss Bellevue **gefeiert**: Bundespräsident Johannes Rau wurde 70 Jahre alt." (On Tuesday in Berlin's Bellevue Palace there was celebrating [it was celebrated]: Federal President Johannes Rau turned 70.)

The passive voice in German is formed by combining the verb *werden* with the past participle of the verb you are making passive. To conjugate the verb forms in the passive voice, you use "werden" in its various tenses. Below are English-German examples of the passive in six different tenses, in the following order: present, simple past (**Imperfekt**), present perfect (**Perfekt**), past perfect, future and future perfect tenses.

The Passive Voice in Various Tenses

English	Deutsch
The letter is (being) written by me.	Der Brief wird von mir geschrieben.
The letter was written by me.	Der Brief wurde von mir geschrieben.
The letter has been written by me.	Der Brief ist von mir geschrieben worden.
The letter had been written by me.	Der Brief war von mir geschrieben worden.
The letter will be written by me.	Der Brief wird von mir geschrieben werden.
The letter will have been written by me.	Der Brief wird von mir geschrieben worden sein

The passive voice is used more frequently in written German than in spoken German. German also uses several active-voice substitutes for the passive voice. One of the most common is the use of man: Hier spricht man Deutsch. = German (is) spoken here. - Man sagt... = It is said... When a man-expression is put into the passive, the agent is not expressed, because man (one, they) is no one in particular. Below are more examples of passive substitutes in German.

Passive Voice Substitutes

AKTIV	PASSIV
Hier raucht man nicht. One doesn't smoke here.	Hier wird nicht geraucht. There's no smoking here.
Man reißt die Straßen auf. They're tearing up the streets.	Die Straßen werden aufgerissen. The streets are being torn up.
Man kann es beweisen. One can prove it.	Es kann bewiesen werden. It can be proved.
Man erklärte mir gar nichts. Mir erklärte man gar nichts. No one explained a thing to me.	Gar nichts wurde mir erklärt. Es wurde mir gar nichts erklärt. Mir wurde gar nichts erklärt.

	Nothing at all was explained to me.
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Notice: (1) The emphasis may be changed by placing different words first. (2) An indirect object (dative) pronoun (mir in the last example) remains dative in either the active or passive voice. (3) In impersonal passive statements, es is often omitted, as in the last set of examples