

Passive Verbs in English: An Explanation for Japanese Learners

In English, a **verb in the passive form** is used when the subject of the sentence is *receiving* the action, not doing it. This is a bit like the Japanese passive voice (受身形, *ukemikei*), but there are some key differences in how it's used and structured. Let's break it down step-by-step.

1. How Passive Works in English

In active voice, the subject does the action:

- **Active:** "I eat sushi." (私が寿司を食べる。)
 - o Subject (I/私) + verb (eat/食べる) + object (sushi/寿司).

In passive voice, the subject receives the action, and the doer (if mentioned) comes later with "by":

- **Passive:** "Sushi is eaten by me." (寿司が私に食べられる。)
 - o Subject (sushi/寿司) + "is" + past participle (eaten/食べられる) + "by me" (私に).

The structure is:

- **Subject + form of "be" + past participle (+ by + doer).**
- Examples:
 - o "The room is cleaned." (部屋が掃除される。)
 - o "The book was written by Tanaka." (本が田中さんに書かれた。)

The verb "be" changes depending on tense (is, was, will be, etc.), but the main verb stays in its past participle form (e.g., eaten, cleaned, written).

2. Similarity to Japanese Passive (受身形)

In Japanese, you use the passive form (e.g., 食べられる, 書かれる) to show something is done to the subject. English passive is similar because the focus shifts to the thing affected:

- Japanese: 猫が犬に追いかけられた。("The cat was chased by the dog.")
- English: "The cat was chased by the dog."

Both languages move the object (猫/cat) to the subject position and show it receiving the action. However, Japanese often uses the passive to express indirect effects or discomfort (e.g., 雨に降られた, "I was rained on"), while English passive is more neutral and doesn't carry that emotional nuance.

3. Key Differences

- **Word Order:** Japanese puts the doer with a particle like に (e.g., 犬に, "by the dog"), and the verb comes at the end. English uses "by" and keeps the verb in the middle.
 - o Japanese: 寿司が私に食べられた。
 - o English: "Sushi was eaten by me."
- **"Be" Verb:** English needs "be" (is, was, are) to make the passive, while Japanese changes the verb itself (e.g., 食べる → 食べられる). Think of "be" as a helper like です or だ, but it's required.

- **Frequency:** English uses passive more often to focus on the action or result, especially when the doer isn't important ("The room was cleaned" = who did it doesn't matter). In Japanese, active voice is more common unless there's a specific reason for passive.

4. Common Tenses in Passive

Here's how passive changes with time, using "write" (書く):

- Present: "The letter is written." (手紙が書かれる。)
- Past: "The letter was written." (手紙が書かれた。)
- Future: "The letter will be written." (手紙が書かれるだろう。)
- Present Perfect: "The letter has been written." (手紙が書かれてしまった。)

Notice the past participle ("written") stays the same, but "be" shifts.

5. Practice Examples

Try these:

- Active: 彼がケーキを作る。("He makes a cake.")
→ Passive: "A cake is made by him." (ケーキが彼に作られる。)
- Active: 先生が本を読みます。("The teacher reads a book.")
→ Passive: "A book is read by the teacher." (本が先生に読まれる。)

6. Tips for Japanese Learners

- English passive often feels stiff if you overuse it (e.g., "Sushi was eaten by me" sounds unnatural—better as "I ate sushi"). Use it when the doer is unknown or less important.
- Think of "be + past participle" as a set pair, like how Japanese adds れる/られる to verbs.
- Listen to English sentences and ask: "Who's doing it?" If the answer isn't the subject, it might be passive.