Passive Voice

CEFR C2 · The passive at the limits: typology, corpus, stance and style

WS1 Voice, Middle & the Passive Gradient · WS2 Corpus, Register & Variation · WS3 Stance, Nominalization & Style · WS4 Scholarly Analysis & Writing · Answer Key

Worksheet 1: Voice, Middle & the Passive Gradient

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C2 (CEFR)*

Reference: Beyond the Active–Passive Binary

Voice is a gradient, not a switch. Alongside the canonical **long passive** (with *by*) and the far commoner **short (agentless) passive**, English has: the **get-passive** (more affective, often adversative); the **mediopassive / middle** (*the book sells well*) with active form but passive-like meaning; **adjectival passives** (*the door was closed* = state, not event); and **ergative** pairs (*the glass broke*). Distinguishing eventive from stative, and verbal from adjectival, is the C2 skill.

Construction	Property	Example
Long passive	agent in by-phrase	It was written **by** her.
Short passive	agent suppressed (the default)	It **was written** in haste.
get-passive	affective, often adversative	He **got sacked**.
Middle / mediopassive	active form, patient subject	This shirt **washes** well.
Adjectival passive	state, not event	The shop **was closed** (all day).
Ergative	intransitive, no agent implied	The vase **broke**.

Part A – Classify the Construction

#	Sentence	Type + evidence
1	These paintings photograph beautifully.	
2	The window was cracked (it had been for weeks).	
3	She got promoted after just a year.	
4	The door opened silently.	
5	The treaty was ratified by all parties.	

Part B – Eventive or Adjectival?

Decide whether the passive is a verbal (eventive) or adjectival (stative) passive, and give a test.

1. The bridge was destroyed (in seconds / for years?). _____
2. I was worried about the results. _____
3. The letter was written by hand. _____

Score: _____ / 20

Worksheet 2: Corpus, Register & Variation

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Reference: What Corpora Reveal

Corpus studies show the passive is far denser in academic and news prose than in conversation; that the vast majority of passives are **short** (agentless), so the "hidden agent" critique applies to a minority; that the **get-passive** is a spoken/informal feature skewed toward adversative meaning; and that prescriptive campaigns against the passive (Orwell, style guides) often misidentify actives as passives. Register, not rule, governs use.

Finding	Corpus tendency
Passive density	academic > news > fiction > conversation
Short vs long	roughly four-fifths are agentless (short)
get-passive	spoken, informal; adversative skew
Method sections	very high passive rate (objectivity norm)
Prescriptivism	"avoid passive" advice often misapplied

Part A – Diagnose Register / Variety

#	Sentence	Register & evidence
1	The specimens were then centrifuged and the supernatant discarded.	
2	He reckons he got done for speeding.	
3	The suspect is understood to have fled the country.	
4	It is hereby agreed that the goods shall be delivered by the seller.	

Part B – Test a Prescriptive Claim

A style guide flags all four as "weak passives to be avoided." Identify which are **not** actually passives, and correct the guide.

#	Sentence	Passive? / analysis
1	The results were surprising.	
2	The data were analysed.	
3	There was a delay.	
4	Mistakes were made.	

Part C – Register Recast

Recast *We lost the samples during transit* as (a) an impersonal lab-report clause and (b) an informal spoken get-passive.

1. (a) _____
2. (b) _____

Score: _____ / 25

Worksheet 3: Stance, Nominalization & Style

Name: _____ *Date:* _____ *Level: C2 (CEFR)*

Reference: The Passive in a System of Impersonality

The passive rarely works alone. It combines with **nominalization** (*the rejection of the proposal*), **existential** and **extraposed** structures (*it was found that…*), and **impersonal projection** to build an objective, agentless register. The same toolkit can construct authority and evade accountability. Mastery means wielding — and diagnosing — the whole system, and knowing when to break it with a sharp active for emphasis.

Device	Function	Example
Passive + nominalization	double agent-loss	**It was decided** that **closure** was needed.
Extraposed passive	impersonal projection	**It is argued that**…
Passive + hedging	calibrated caution	The effect **may be said to be** modest.
Strategic active	emphasis / accountability	**The board** chose to close it.

Part A – Unpack the Impersonality

Rewrite each in the active with an explicit agent, and name every impersonalizing device removed.

1. It was concluded that a reduction in staffing would be implemented. _____
2. The cancellation of the programme was announced. _____

Part B – Stance Calibration

Rewrite "This proves the theory" at three stance levels using passive/impersonal resources: strong, hedged, distancing.

1. Strong: _____
2. Hedged: _____
3. Distancing (attributed): _____

Part C – Diagnose the Rhetoric

Explain how the passive + nominalization combine to obscure agency, and rewrite for accountability.

> *Following the misreporting of the figures, a decision was taken that disclosure would be delayed.*

_____

Score: _____ / 30

Worksheet 4: Scholarly Analysis & Writing

Name: _____ Date: _____ Level: C2 (CEFR)

Part A – Critical Text Analysis

> The passive has long been maligned, and not without reason; yet the case against it is routinely overstated. It is claimed that the construction breeds evasion, that agents are made to vanish and responsibility with them. But the charge, if it is to be sustained, must be weighed against the evidence: in the corpora, most passives are agentless not because an agent is being concealed but because none is relevant, the patient having been placed first for the plainest of reasons — that it is what the passage is about. Where an agent is suppressed that ought to be named, the fault is not the grammar's but the writer's; the tool has been misused, not shown to be treacherous.

1. Identify every passive (including non-finite and extraposed forms) and classify each by function and by short/long type.
2. "agents are made to vanish" is itself a passive. Analyse the irony and its rhetorical purpose.
3. Analyse how the passage marshals corpus reasoning to rebut the prescriptive case; assess the soundness of the argument.
4. The final clause distinguishes fault in the writer from fault in the grammar. Evaluate this distinction, drawing on the interplay of passive, nominalization, and agency.

Part B – Extended Scholarly Writing

Write the opening two paragraphs (220–260 words) of a scholarly essay on: "The English passive is a resource for information management, not a device for evasion — a distinction its critics collapse." Requirements — include and underline: (1) one **short (agentless) passive** whose suppression you justify on information-structure grounds; (2) one **long passive** exploiting end-focus; (3) one **get-passive** or **middle** used deliberately; (4) one **extraposed/reporting passive** (*it is argued that…*); (5) one precise **metalinguistic term** (mediopassive, end-focus, nominalization, agentless, adjectival passive) used correctly; (6) two **epistemic hedges** calibrated to each claim; (7) one **conjunct** that maps the argument's logic precisely.

#	Line
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	

8	

Features: _____ / 7 Word count: _____ Score: _____ / 35

Answer Key & Teacher Notes

For teacher use only — C2 Level, Passive Voice

Worksheet 1 – Part A (model)

1 middle/mediopassive — active form, patient subject, adverb "beautifully"; no agent implied. · 2 adjectival (stative) passive — durative "for weeks", describes a state. · 3 get-passive — affective, marks a change of state affecting the subject. · 4 ergative/intransitive — "open" alternates transitive/intransitive; no agent implied. · 5 long (canonical verbal) passive — eventive, agent in a by-phrase.

Worksheet 1 – Part B (model)

1 eventive — "in seconds" (a punctual event); "for years" would force a stative reading. · 2 adjectival/stative — "worried" is a psychological state; gradable (very worried). · 3 eventive — "by hand" implies the writing action; a by/instrument phrase signals the verbal passive.

Tests: modification by *very* and un- prefix → adjectival; by-phrase, agent-oriented adverbs, and punctual time → verbal/eventive.

Worksheet 2 – Part A (model)

1 academic/scientific method — agentless past passives, technical lexis. · 2 informal spoken — "reckons", get-passive "got done" (adversative slang). · 3 journalistic — reporting passive "is understood to have fled". · 4 legal/contractual — "hereby", deontic "shall", agentless obligation.

Worksheet 2 – Part B (model)

1 NOT passive — "were" + predicative adjective "surprising" (copular). · 2 passive — "were analysed", eventive. · 3 NOT passive — existential "there was". · 4 passive — agentless; often cited as evasive but grammatically a normal short passive. The guide errs by lumping copular and existential clauses with true passives.

Worksheet 2 – Part C (model)

(a) The samples were lost during transit. · (b) The samples got lost on the way / in transit.

Worksheet 3 – Part A (model)

1 The management concluded that it would cut staffing. (removes: extraposed passive "it was concluded", nominal-ish "a reduction in staffing", passive "would be implemented"). · 2 The ministry announced that it was cancelling the programme. (removes nominalization "the cancellation" + passive "was announced").

Worksheet 3 – Part B (model)

Strong: This is shown to prove the theory. / The theory is thereby established. · Hedged: This may be taken to support the theory. · Distancing: It has been claimed that this proves the theory.

Worksheet 3 – Part C (model)

The passive ("a decision was taken", "disclosure would be delayed") plus the nominalization ("the misreporting of the figures") delete every agent: who misreported, who decided, who would delay. For accountability: "After the finance team misreported the figures, the directors decided to delay disclosure."

Worksheet 4 – Part A (model)

1 "has … been maligned" (short, resultative); "It is claimed that" (extraposed reporting, short); "agents are made to vanish" (short, eventive — ironically agentless); "responsibility with them" (ellipted passive); "it is to be sustained" (modal passive, short); "an agent is being concealed" (short, progressive); "the patient having been placed first" (non-finite perfect passive); "an agent is suppressed" (short); "the tool has been misused" (short, resultative). Nearly all are short — the passage's own point. · 2 The writer uses an agentless passive to describe agents vanishing, enacting the very phenomenon under discussion; the irony foregrounds that agentlessness is often structural, not sinister. · 3 The argument moves from prescriptive claim (passive = evasion) to corpus evidence (most passives are agentless for information-structure reasons) to a conclusion relocating fault from grammar to writer. It is sound insofar as the corpus premise holds; a critic might note that frequency of innocent use does not exonerate strategic misuse, which the passage concedes. · 4 The distinction is well founded: the construction is a neutral resource, but nominalization + passive can jointly erase agency, so responsibility attaches to the writer's choices in context, not to the form itself.

Worksheet 4 – Part B: Marking Rubric

Criterion	Descriptor at C2	Marks
Justified short passive	Suppression defended on info-structure grounds	0–5
Long passive (end-focus)	Agent deferred for focus, correct	0–5
get-passive / middle	Deliberate, apt use	0–5
Extraposed/reporting passive	it is argued that…, correct	0–5
Metalinguistic accuracy	Term used correctly, no overclaiming	0–5
Argument, hedging & length	220–260 words; contestable claim; calibrated hedges	0–10

The C2 benchmark is conscious orchestration of the whole impersonal system: a student who suppresses an agent for end-focus and can explain, in a footnote, why that suppression is information-structural rather than evasive has demonstrated mastery.