LATIN

The Passive Voice

Forms, meaning, agents, worked examples and translation practice

THE BIG IDEA In an active sentence, the subject performs the action. In a passive sentence, the subject receives the action.

ACTIVE	PASSIVE
The girl praises the poet.	The poet is praised by the girl.
puella poētam laudat.	poēta ā puellā laudātur.
subject → action → object	subject ← action ← agent

Scholarship tip: do not translate word by word. First identify the verb, then its person, number and tense; finally decide who receives the action and whether an agent or means is expressed.

Learning goals

☐ recognise and translate present, imperfect, future, perfect and pluperfect passive forms

☐ form the present-system passive using the correct personal endings

☐ form the perfect-system passive from a perfect passive participle and sum

☐ distinguish a personal agent (ā/ab + ablative) from a means or instrument (ablative alone)

☐ apply participle agreement accurately and translate idiomatically

1 What the passive voice does

Active: A lion is chasing the boy. The focus is on what the lion is doing.

Passive: The boy is being chased by the lion. The focus is on what the boy is suffering.

The event is the same, but the sentence has been reorganised. In the active sentence, the lion is the subject because it performs the action. In the passive sentence, the boy is the subject because he receives the action. The passive lets us place the receiver—and what happens to it—at the centre of the sentence.

WHAT CHANGES?	ACTIVE	PASSIVE
person or thing receiving the action	accusative object: puerum	nominative subject: puer
person or creature performing the action	nominative subject: leō	ā/ab + ablative agent: ā leōne
verb	fugat — chases	fugātur — is being chased

Worked transformation: leō puerum fugat → puer ā leōne fugātur

Notice that the passive is not made merely by changing the verb. The cases of the nouns also change because their grammatical jobs have changed.

How the active agent becomes ablative

The agent is the person or creature that actually performs the action. In an active sentence, that agent is normally the nominative subject. When the sentence is turned into the passive, the receiver becomes the new nominative subject. The old active subject is no longer the grammatical subject, so it cannot remain nominative. If it is expressed, it is put into the ablative and introduced by ā or ab: “by”.

ACTIVE SUBJECT (NOMINATIVE)	PASSIVE AGENT (Ā/AB + ABLATIVE)	CHANGE
leō	ā leōne	3rd declension: -ō → -ōne
magister	ā magistrō	2nd declension: -er → -ō
puella	ā puellā	1st declension: -a → -ā
rēx	ā rēge	3rd declension: rēx → rēge
mīlitēs	ā mīlitibus	plural: nominative -ēs → ablative -ibus
hostēs	ab hostibus	ab is commonly used before a word beginning with h

A useful mechanical test: find the active subject; change it into the ablative; put ā/ab before it. Then change the active object from accusative into the nominative, because it has become the passive subject.

Animate agent or inanimate means?

This distinction concerns the doer or cause of the action—not the passive subject. First ask what performs the action. If the answer is a person, god, animal or other living/animate agent acting deliberately, use ā/ab + the ablative. If the answer is a thing, substance, weapon, natural force or instrument, use the ablative alone. This is called the ablative of means or instrument.

QUESTION	ANIMATE AGENT	INANIMATE MEANS / INSTRUMENT
What performs the action?	a person or living creature	a thing, material, weapon or force
Latin construction	ā/ab + ablative	ablative alone—no preposition
Example	puer ā leōne fugātur.	mīles gladiō vulnerātur.
Meaning	The boy is chased by the lion.	The soldier is wounded with/by a sword.

Compare the following carefully:

LATIN	WHY?	ENGLISH
mīles ab hoste interficitur.	hostis is an animate personal agent	The soldier is killed by the enemy.
mīles tēlō interficitur.	tēlum is an inanimate instrument	The soldier is killed with/by a weapon.
puella ā deā servātur.	dea is an animate divine agent	The girl is saved by the goddess.
navis ventō movētur.	ventus is an inanimate natural force	The ship is moved by the wind.
captīvus ā custōdibus dūcitur.	custōdēs are animate agents	The prisoner is led by the guards.
mūrus saxīs frangitur.	saxa are inanimate means	The wall is broken with stones.

Do not use English "by" as your test. English can say "killed by the enemy" and "killed by a sword". Latin distinguishes them: **ab hoste** but **gladiō**.

Present and imperfect: active beside passive

In the present system, passive forms are made by replacing the active personal ending with the corresponding passive ending. The red letters below show the passive endings. Macrons have been added throughout.

PERSON	PRESENT ACTIVE I carry	PRESENT PASSIVE I am carried	IMPERFECT ACTIVE I was carrying	IMPERFECT PASSIVE I was being carried
I	portō	portor	portābam	portābar
you (s.)	portās	portāris	portābās	portābāris
he/she/it	portat	portātur	portābat	portābātur
we	portāmus	portāmur	portābāmus	portābāmur
you (pl.)	portātis	portāminī	portābātis	portābāminī
they	portant	portantur	portābant	portābantur

2 Present passive

The present passive describes an action happening now or habitually: “I am praised”, “you are being warned”, “they are guarded”. Begin with the present stem and attach the passive endings. In the 3rd conjugation, the stem vowel changes; in the 3½ conjugation, -iuntur appears in the 3rd-person plural.

PERSON	1st: laudō	2nd: moneō	3rd: regō	3½: capiō	4th: audiō
1 sg	laudor	moneor	regor	capior	audior
2 sg	laudāris	monēris	regeris	caperis	audīris
3 sg	laudātur	monētur	regitur	capitur	audītur
1 pl	laudāmur	monēmur	regimur	capimur	audīmur
2 pl	laudāminī	monēminī	regiminī	capiminī	audīminī
3 pl	laudantur	monentur	reguntur	capiuntur	audiuntur

Worked examples

puella ā magistrō laudātur. — The girl is praised by the teacher.

epistula ā puerō scrībitur. — The letter is being written by the boy.

captīvī ā custōdibus custōdiuntur. — The prisoners are guarded by the guards.

verba magistrī ā discipulīs audiuntur. — The teacher’s words are heard by the pupils.

mūrus saxīs frangitur. — The wall is broken with stones.

3 Imperfect passive

The imperfect passive describes an action that was continuing, repeated or unfinished in the past: “was being praised”, “used to be warned”. Take the present infinitive, remove final -re, add -bā-, and then add the passive endings. The 1st-person singular ends in -bar.

PERSON	1st: laudā-	2nd: monē-	3rd: rege-	3½: cape-	4th: audī-
1 sg	laudābar	monēbar	regēbar	capiēbar	audiēbar
2 sg	laudābāris	monēbāris	regēbāris	capiēbāris	audiēbāris
3 sg	laudābātur	monēbātur	regēbātur	capiēbātur	audiēbātur
1 pl	laudābāmur	monēbāmur	regēbāmur	capiēbāmur	audiēbāmur
2 pl	laudābāminī	monēbāminī	regēbāminī	capiēbāminī	audiēbāminī
3 pl	laudābantur	monēbantur	regēbantur	capiēbantur	audiēbantur

Worked examples

oppidum ab hostibus oppugnābātur. — The town was being attacked by the enemies.

captīvī ā mīlitibus dūcēbantur. — The prisoners were being led by the soldiers.

puellae ā magistrā monēbantur. — The girls used to be warned by the teacher.

tēla ā sociīs iaciēbantur. — The weapons were being thrown by the allies.

epistulae ā rēgīnā audiēbantur. — The letters were being heard by the queen.

4 Future passive

Latin has two future formation patterns. The 1st and 2nd conjugations use -b-. The 3rd, 3½ and 4th use -ar, -ēris, -ētur, -ēmur, -ēminī, -entur. Learn the patterns separately.

Pattern A — 1st and 2nd conjugations

PERSON	1st: laudō	2nd: moneō	TRANSLATION MODEL
1 sg	laudābor	monēbor	I shall be …
2 sg	laudāberis	monēberis	you will be …
3 sg	laudābitur	monēbitur	he/she/it will be …
1 pl	laudābimur	monēbimur	we shall be …
2 pl	laudābiminī	monēbiminī	you will be …
3 pl	laudābuntur	monēbuntur	they will be …

Pattern B — 3rd, 3½ and 4th conjugations

PERSON	3rd: regō	3½: capiō	4th: audiō
1 sg	regar	capiar	audiar
2 sg	regēris	capiēris	audiēris
3 sg	regētur	capiētur	audiētur
1 pl	regēmur	capiēmur	audiēmur
2 pl	regēminī	capiēminī	audiēminī
3 pl	regentur	capientur	audientur

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE Present regitur = “is ruled”; future regētur = “will be ruled”. The vowel and macron matter.

5 The perfect passive

The perfect passive is made from two words: a perfect passive participle plus the present tense of sum. The participle tells us what has been done; sum tells us the person and number. Together they describe a completed passive action.

Be aware: portātus sum looks literally like "I am carried", because sum is present in form. Do not translate the two words separately. In this construction, the whole verb is perfect: **portātus sum = I was carried / I have been carried.**

The participle is an adjective

Perfect passive participles decline like bonus, -a, -um. They must agree with the person or thing receiving the action—the passive subject—in gender, number and case. In the following basic examples, the subject is nominative, so the participle is also nominative.

SUBJECT	PERFECT PASSIVE	WHY THIS ENDING?	TRANSLATION
puer (masculine)	puer ē vīllā portātus est	-us agrees with puer	the boy was carried out of the house
puella (feminine)	puella ē vīllā portāta est	-a agrees with puella	the girl was carried out of the house
dōnum (neuter)	dōnum ē vīllā portātum est	-um agrees with dōnum	the gift was carried out of the house
puerī (masculine plural)	puerī portātī sunt	-ī agrees with puerī	the boys were carried
puellae (feminine plural)	puellae portātae sunt	-ae agrees with puellae	the girls were carried
dōna (neuter plural)	dōna portāta sunt	-a agrees with dōna	the gifts were carried

Perfect active and passive compared

PERSON	PERFECT ACTIVE I carried	PERFECT PASSIVE (m.) I was carried	PERFECT PASSIVE (f.) I was carried	PERFECT PASSIVE (n.) I was carried
I	portāvī	portātus sum	portāta sum	portātum sum
you (s.)	portāvistī	portātus es	portāta es	portātum es
he/she/it	portāvit	portātus est	portāta est	portātum est
we	portāvimus	portātī sumus	portātae sumus	portāta sumus
you (pl.)	portāvistis	portātī estis	portātae estis	portāta estis
they	portāvērunt	portātī sunt	portātae sunt	portāta sunt

6 The pluperfect passive

The pluperfect places a completed action further back in the past. It means “had been …”. Its formation is exactly parallel to the perfect passive: use the same agreeing perfect passive participle, but replace the present tense of sum with the imperfect tense of sum: eram, erās, erat, erāmus, erātis, erant.

Perfect passive: portātus est = he was / has been carried. **Pluperfect passive:** portātus erat = he had been carried.

Why “had been” matters

The pluperfect is normally used when two things happened in the past and one was already complete before the other. The pluperfect marks the earlier action. The later action is commonly perfect or imperfect. Ask: “Which event had already happened?”

TIME ORDER	ENGLISH	LATIN
earlier completed action	the boy had been beaten	puer pulsātus erat
later past action	the boy ran away	puer effūgit

Pluperfect active and passive compared

PERSON	PLUPERFECT ACTIVE I had carried	PLUPERFECT PASSIVE (m.) I had been carried	PLUPERFECT PASSIVE (f.) I had been carried	PLUPERFECT PASSIVE (n.) I had been carried
I	portāveram	portātus eram	portāta eram	portātum eram
you (s.)	portāverās	portātus erās	portāta erās	portātum erās
he/she/it	portāverat	portātus erat	portāta erat	portātum erat
we	portāverāmus	portātī erāmus	portātae erāmus	portāta erāmus
you (pl.)	portāverātis	portātī erātis	portātae erātis	portāta erātis
they	portāverant	portātī erant	portātae erant	portāta erant

Worked contrasts: which action is earlier?

ENGLISH	LATIN	WHAT THE TENSES SHOW
Because the teacher had beaten him, the boy ran away from school.	quod magister eum pulsāverat, puer ā lūdō effūgit.	pulsāverat is active pluperfect: the beating happened first.
Because he had been beaten by his teacher, the boy ran away from school.	quod ā magistrō pulsātus erat, puer ā lūdō effūgit.	pulsātus erat is passive pluperfect: the boy received the earlier action.
Because he had run away from school, the boy was beaten by his teacher.	quod ā lūdō effūgerat, puer ā magistrō pulsātus est.	effūgerat happened first; pulsātus est is the later perfect action.

Formation summary: perfect passive participle + present sum = perfect passive; perfect passive participle + imperfect sum = pluperfect passive. In both tenses, the participle must still agree with the passive subject.

Perfect passive participles to recognise

These are useful Level 3 and cumulative-list participles. The form shown is masculine nominative singular; change -us to -a or -um, and use the appropriate plural ending, to agree with the subject.

PARTICIPLE	MEANING	PRESENT VERB	PARTICIPLE	MEANING	PRESENT VERB
āctus, -a, -um	done	agō	captus	taken, captured	capiō
cognitus	found out	cognōscō	coāctus	forced	cōgō
cōnspectus	noticed, caught sight of	cōnspiciō	dēlētus	destroyed	dēleō
ductus	led	dūcō	factus	made, done	faciō
lātus	carried	ferō	iactus	thrown	iaciō
interfectus	killed	interficiō	inventus	found	inveniō
iussus	ordered	iubeō	lēctus	read	legō
missus	sent	mittō	mōtus	moved	moveō
occīsus	killed	occīdō	oblātus	offered	offerō
oppressus	crushed	opprimō	pulsus	driven	pellō
positus	placed, put	pōnō	prōmissus	promised	prōmittō
quaesītus	looked for	quaerō	raptus	seized	rapiō
relictus	left	relinquō	scrīptus	written	scrībō
versus	turned	vertō	vīsus	seen	videō
victus	conquered	vincō			

7 A reliable translation method

STEP	QUESTION	EXAMPLE: puellae ā magistrō laudātae sunt
1	What is the verb phrase?	laudātae sunt
2	What tense and voice?	perfect passive
3	Who is the subject?	puellae — feminine plural
4	Does the participle agree?	yes: laudātae is feminine plural
5	Who performs the action?	ā magistrō — by the teacher
6	Natural English?	The girls were / have been praised by the teacher.

Common traps

TRAP	CORRECTION
Treating -tur as “he”	-tur is 3rd-person singular; the subject may be masculine, feminine or neuter.
Calling ā/ab + ablative the subject	It is the agent. The nominative receiver is the subject.
Forgetting agreement in the perfect system	Choose -us/-a/-um or -ī/-ae/-a to match the subject.
Using ā/ab for an instrument	Use the ablative alone for a thing: gladiō, tēlō, saxīs.
Confusing present and future 3rd-conjugation forms	Compare regitur (is ruled) with regētur (will be ruled).

EXAM CHECK Underline the whole verb phrase. Label person, number, tense and voice. Box the nominative subject. Circle ā/ab + ablative only if it expresses a personal agent.

8.1 Practice — Present passive

A Latin to English

Translate each sentence into natural English. Identify the complete passive verb before you begin.

1. oppidum ā custōdibus custōdītur.
2. tēla ā mīlitibus iaciuntur.
3. captīvī ā rēge līberantur.
4. opus ā puellā perficitur.
5. verba principis audiuntur.

B English to Latin

Translate each different sentence into Latin. Check the subject, conjugation, tense, passive ending and agent construction.

1. The city is guarded by the soldiers.
2. The prizes are carried by the young men.
3. The other prisoner is being led by the guard.
4. The whole task is finished by the girl.
5. The animals are driven by the men.

8.2 Practice — Imperfect passive

A Latin to English

Translate each sentence into natural English. Identify the complete passive verb before you begin.

1. urbs ā cīvibus dēfendēbātur.
2. captīvī ab aliīs custōdibus custōdiēbantur.
3. tēlum ā mīlite ferēbātur.
4. opera ā puellīs perficiēbantur.
5. hostēs ā principibus pellēbantur.

B English to Latin

Translate each different sentence into Latin. Check the subject, conjugation, tense, passive ending and agent construction.

1. The animals were being guarded by the young man.
2. The city used to be defended by the citizens.
3. The rewards were being sought by the soldiers.
4. The task was being completed by the other girl.
5. The enemies were being driven by the leader.

8.3 Practice — Future passive

A Latin to English

Translate each sentence into natural English. Identify the complete passive verb before you begin.

1. mīles ā principe laudābitur.
2. captīvī ā custōdibus monēbuntur.
3. urbs ab hostibus petētur.
4. animalia ā virīs capientur.
5. verba puellae audientur.

B English to Latin

Translate each different sentence into Latin. Check the subject, conjugation, tense, passive ending and agent construction.

1. The task will be guarded by the girl.
2. The soldiers will be praised by the leader.
3. The city will be ruled by the prince.
4. The prisoner will be captured by the guards.
5. The weapons will be carried by the men.

COVERAGE CHECK Questions include both future patterns: 1st/2nd conjugation -b- forms and 3rd/3½/4th -ar/-ēris/-ētur forms.

8.4 Practice — Perfect passive

A Latin to English

Translate each sentence into natural English. Identify the complete passive verb before you begin.

1. oppidum ab hostibus captum est.
2. custōdēs ā principe laudātī sunt.
3. puellae ā mīlitibus servātae sunt.
4. tēla ā virīs lāta sunt.
5. opus ab aliā puellā perfectum est.

B English to Latin

Translate each different sentence into Latin. Check the subject, conjugation, tense, passive ending and agent construction.

1. The city was defended by the citizens.
2. The animals have been captured by the guards.
3. The leader was killed by the enemy.
4. The rewards were carried by the soldiers.
5. The other girl was helped by the young man.

9 Answer key

Equivalent idiomatic English translations are acceptable. In perfect passive sentences, either a simple past or a present perfect may fit the context.

Present passive

A1. The town is guarded by the guards.
A2. The weapons are thrown by the soldiers.
A3. The prisoners are freed by the king.
A4. The task is completed by the girl.
A5. The leader's words are heard.
B1. urbs ā mīlitibus custōdītur.
B2. praemia ab iuvenibus feruntur.
B3. alius captīvus ā custōde dūcitur.
B4. totum opus ā puellā perficitur.
B5. animalia ā virīs pelluntur.

Imperfect passive

A1. The city was being defended by the citizens.
A2. The prisoners were being guarded by the other guards.
A3. The weapon was being carried by the soldier.
A4. The tasks were being completed by the girls.
A5. The enemies were being driven by the leaders.
B1. animalia ab iuvene custōdiēbantur.
B2. urbs ā cīvibus dēfendēbātur.
B3. praemia ā mīlitibus petēbantur.
B4. opus ab aliā puellā perficiēbātur.
B5. hostēs ā principe pellēbantur.

Future passive

A1. The soldier will be praised by the leader.
A2. The prisoners will be warned by the guards.
A3. The city will be attacked by the enemies.
A4. The animals will be captured by the men.
A5. The girl's words will be heard.
B1. opus ā puellā custōdiētur.
B2. mīlitēs ā principe laudābuntur.
B3. urbs ā principe regētur.
B4. captīvus ā custōdibus capiētur.
B5. tēla ā virīs ferentur.

Perfect passive

A1. The town was / has been captured by the enemies.
A2. The guards were / have been praised by the leader.

A3. The girls were / have been saved by the soldiers.
A4. The weapons were / have been carried by the men.
A5. The task was / has been completed by the other girl.
B1. urbs ā cīvibus dēfēnsa est.
B2. animalia ā custōdibus capta sunt.
B3. princeps ab hoste interfectus est.
B4. praemia ā mīlitibus lāta sunt.
B5. alia puella ab iuvene iūta est.

10 One-page revision grid

TENSE	HOW TO FORM IT	MODEL	TRANSLATION
present	present stem + passive endings	laudātur	is / is being praised
imperfect	present stem + -bā- + endings	laudābātur	was being / used to be praised
future (1st/2nd)	stem + -b- future passive	laudābitur	will be praised
future (3rd/3½/4th)	-ar, -ēris, -ētur…	regētur	will be ruled
perfect	PPP + present sum	laudātus est	was / has been praised
pluperfect	PPP + imperfect sum	laudātus erat	had been praised

Final checklist

☐ I have found the whole verb phrase.

☐ I have identified person, number, tense and voice.

☐ I have found the nominative subject.

☐ I have checked ā/ab + ablative for a personal agent.

☐ I have used the ablative alone for a means or instrument.

☐ In the perfect system, my participle agrees with the subject.

☐ I have preserved every important macron.

CORE SUMMARY Present-system passive = one word with passive endings. Perfect-system passive = agreeing participle + a form of sum. Translate the sense, not merely the separate words.