

Tenses in the Passive Voice

In English, we change tenses in the passive by changing the auxiliary verb "to be" -- he is seen, he was seen, he will be seen, etc. The same is true in German: to change tenses, simply change the verb *werden*. The only unusual element comes in the past participle in the perfect tense: instead of the expected "geworden", we use just "worden". The most common passive tenses, and the ones you need to be very comfortable with, are the present and simple past.

Präsens (<i>present</i>):	Du <u>wirst</u> gesehen.	<i>You are seen / You are being seen.</i>
Präteritum (<i>simple past</i>):	Du <u>wurdest</u> gesehen.	<i>You were seen / You were being seen.</i>
Perfekt (<i>present perfect</i>):	Du <u>bist</u> gesehen <u>worden</u> .	<i>You have been seen.</i>
Futur (<i>future</i>):	Du <u>wirst</u> gesehen <u>werden</u> .	<i>You will be seen.</i>
Präsens mit Modalverb (<i>present with modal</i>):	Du <u>kannst</u> gesehen <u>werden</u> .	<i>You can be seen.</i>
Präteritum mit Modalverb (<i>past with modal verb</i>):	Du <u>konntest</u> gesehen <u>werden</u> .	<i>You could be seen.</i>

Passive in three easy steps:

1. The accusative object of the original active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence -- and changes to the nominative case accordingly. The original subject of the active sentence (the agent) doesn't need to be stated in the passive version (often, that's the point of the passive), but if you need to, you can state it by inserting *von* + dative. All other nouns and pronouns remain unchanged: in particular, **dative objects remain dative**. If there is no accusative object, you can use a dummy "es" as the subject, or simply leave the subject slot empty (filling it with an object or adverb).
2. Change the main verb into the past participle (ge- form...usually)! Doing otherwise makes a completely different sentence with a very different meaning. **Every passive sentence in every tense in German (and English) has a past participle of the main verb.**
3. Use the correct form of werden as the auxiliary (conjugated) verb, and decide on which tense of *werden* to use.

Aspects of the Passive Unique to German

Occasionally, German uses the passive voice in ways that English cannot. Since these don't translate directly into English, they may be hard to grasp, but these idiosyncrasies can be learned through regular practice.

The introductory *es*

Es is often used to begin a passive main clause, even when it is not the subject.

Es werden heute viele Häuser aus Holz gebaut. *Many houses are built of wood today.*

Note that *viele Häuser* is the actual subject of that sentence (and thus *werden* agrees with that plural subject). Es is merely a placeholder, and plays no grammatical role. If any other element is moved to the first position, the *es* disappears:

Heute werden viele Häuser aus Holz gebaut. *Today many houses are built of wood.*

This introductory *es* is particularly common when verbs that take the dative are used, as discussed above.

Es wird mir geholfen. *I am being helped.*
Es wurde ihm noch eine Chance gegeben. *He was given another chance.*

The impersonal passive

UNLIKE ENGLISH, German can take an intransitive verb -- a verb that has no direct object at all -- and turn it into a passive sentence. There is absolutely no way of doing this in English. If you have the sentence "We walked to the store" you cannot put it into the passive in English ('to the store was walked' doesn't make any sense). In German, you can, and you do -- often. You merely use the dummy es as the subject, and the rest of the rules for passive constructions apply:

Wir liefen zum Markt. ⇒ Es wurde zum Markt gelaufen.
We walked to the store. ⇒ *(no direct translation!)*

This use of the passive (called the impersonal passive, since there's no 'person' specified) is very common in German, and is used to denote general activity. To indicate that "There is dancing going on at the party" for instance, Germans will say:

Man tanzt auf der Party. ⇒ Es wird auf der Party getanzt.

Other common examples of the impersonal passive:

Es wird geklatscht. *People are chatting; there is chatting going on.*
Bei uns zu Hause wird viel gelacht. *At our house there's a lot of laughing.*
Hier wird oft geraucht. *There's often smoking done here; people smoke a lot here.*