

The Passive: Objects & Common OET Ergative Exceptions

The verb is essential - understand what it means and how it works with objects

What do you think about these sentences?

1. The instructions **were informed** to Mr Smith.
2. Mr Johnson **has been explained** the procedure.
3. Mrs Edwards **was given** 10 minutes to recover from giving blood.
4. The results **were notified** to Mrs Johnson.
5. The family **was discussed** the decision about John's care.
6. Brian **was diagnosed** with psoriasis.

If you're thinking No 3 and No 6 are ok but the others are bad - well done! The hard bit is trying to understand why! Let's look at it below.

There are two different types of objects:

- **direct object** - the noun which receives the action
- **indirect object** - the noun which benefits from the action

Some verbs have different relationships with objects.

Here are two examples of this, using the passive:

give is very flexible:

1. Mrs Edwards **was given** 10 minutes to recover from giving blood.
2. 10 minutes **were given** to Mr Edwards to recover from giving blood.

Do you see how we can say **give** with Mr Edwards and with 10 minutes?

This is because **give** can be used with **direct** and **indirect objects**.

But look at **explain**:

1. The procedure **has been explained** to Mr Edwards.
2. Mr Edwards ~~**has been explained**~~ the procedure.

It is not possible to use **explain** with the indirect object. It is not flexible.

Unfortunately, this grammar changes for different verbs. Let's have a look at some examples:

| Verb | Object | Active | Passive |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| give | direct object | The nurse gave the instructions to Mr Smith | The instructions were given to Mr Smith. |
| | indirect object | The nurse gave Mr Smith the instructions. | Mr Smith was given the instructions. |
| explain | direct object | The nurse explained the instructions to Mr Smith. | The instructions were explained to Mr Smith. |
| | indirect object | The nurse explained Mr Smith the instructions. | Mr Smith was explained the instructions. |
| prescribe | direct object | The doctor prescribed antibiotics to Mr Smith. | Antibiotics were prescribed to Mr Smith. |
| | indirect object | The doctor prescribed Mr Smith with antibiotics. | Mr Smith was prescribed with antibiotics. |
| discuss | direct object | The doctor discussed the procedure with Mr Smith. | The procedure was discussed with Mr Smith. |
| | indirect object | The doctor discussed Mr Smith with the procedure | Mr Smith was discussed the procedure. |
| insert | direct object | The surgeon inserted a stent into Mr Smith's arm. | A stent was inserted into Mr Smith's arm. |
| | indirect object | The surgeon inserted Mr Smith's arm into a stent. | Mr Smith's arm was inserted |
| inject | direct object | The nurse injected insulin into Mr Smith's arm. | Insulin was injected into Mr Smith's arm. |
| | indirect object | The nurse injected Mr Smith's arm with insulin. | Mr Smith's arm was injected with insulin. |
| diagnose | direct object | The doctor diagnosed pneumonia. | Pneumonia was diagnosed. |
| | direct object | The doctor diagnosed Mr Smith with pneumonia. | Mr Smith was diagnosed with pneumonia. |
| provide | direct object | The nurse provided care for/to the patient | Care was provided for/to the patient. |
| | indirect object - preferable in terms of style | The nurse provided the patient with care. | The patient was provided with care. |

| | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|---|--|
| prepare | direct object | The nurse prepared the medication for Mr Smith. The nurse prepared Mr Smith for the operation. | The medication was prepared for Mr Smith. Mr Smith was prepared for the operation. |
| | indirect object | The nurse prepared Mr Smith the medication The nurse prepared the operation for Mr Smith | Mr Smith was prepared the medication The operation was prepared for Mr Smith. |
| notify | direct object | The nurse notified social services about the outbreak. | Social services were notified about the outbreak. |
| | indirect object | The nurse notified the outbreak | The outbreak was notified to social services |

Ergative Passive - Common OET Exceptions

What is the ergative passive?

Some transitive verbs can be used to show passive or active, in strange ways.

Sometimes a noun which is often thought of as passive/object is used as a subject in a sentence :

Blood Pressure: 120/80 - 175/95

It's common to think of blood pressure this way:

Paul's blood pressure **was affected** by his recent illness.

Paul's recent illness **affected** his blood pressure.

And there is nothing wrong with it!

However, the most common way we use blood pressure is to say that it is a subject (does something), instead of an object:

Paul's blood pressure **was increased** overnight.

And we do this with lots of other nouns too!

Exercise

Write a sentence for each of the nouns below:

- temperature (drop)
- class (start)
- ice (crack)
- building (shake)
- infection (worse)
- fever (break)
- cholesterol (decrease)

Answers

- temperature (drop)

Feel Mr Johnson's forehead. I think **his temperature** *has dropped*.

- class (start)

time? What time did the class start?

The class *started* at 09:00.

- ice (crack)

I stepped onto the ice and **it** *cracked*.

- building (shake)

There was an earthquake and the **buildings** *were shaking / shook*.

- infection (worse)

- His chest infection has worsened.
- His infection has worsened.
- His infection is getting worse.
- His infection was worsening during last night
- The infection has worsened, resulting in him having a high temperature

- fever (break)

collocation - two words typically go together

- His fever broke at 12h.
 - His fever has broken.
 - Having used antibiotics for 3 days, we managed to reduce her temperature.
 - At 12 am his fever broke.
 - During his 12.00 check-up review his fever broke.
 - His fever broke before midnight.
- cholesterol (decrease)
 - Despite his current medication, his level of cholesterol **has not decreased**.
 - His cholesterol has been decreasing over the last 2 months.
 - Mr Smith was commenced on regular medication, and as a result his cholesterol decreased.
 - His cholesterol increased after being non-compliant with his medication
 - Her cholesterol decreased from 350 to 320 after she had started medication.