

Change-of-State verbs ¹

Common mistakes:

- The world's population was increased.
- The building was collapsed.
- The economy was improved.

Change-of-state verbs occur both transitively and intransitively, with little or no change in meaning. The direct object of the transitive sentence is the subject of the intransitive one.

Transitive

- John opened the door.
- Inflation has increased prices.

Intransitive

- The door opened.
- Prices have increased.

When would you use the agentless sentence rather than the active or the passive sentence with an explicit or implied agent?

There are several situations in which agentless “change-of-state” sentences are preferred to either active sentences or passive sentences with or without expressed agents. Here are three situations in which non-native speakers usually use passive voice but native speakers use active.

1. When the focus is on the change of state and the agent is irrelevant or very secondary: “The store opens at 9 a.m.”
2. When it is natural to expect change to occur (i.e., physical, social, or psychological laws’ seem to be involved): “Mrs. Smith’s opinion of Ronald Reagan changed.”
3. When there are so many possible causes for a change of state that it would be misleading to imply a single agent: “Prices increased.”

¹ Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D. 1983. *The Grammar Book*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House