

# Passive alternatives

## — DIE PASSIVERSATZFORMEN

Passive alternatives are German structures such as *sich lassen*, *-bar* and *sein + zu* that give the meaning of a passive sentence (“can be done”, “must be done”) without using *werden*.

Germans got tired of building the *Passiv* (*werden* + Partizip II) over and over, so they came up with shorter ways to say “can be done” and “must be done”.

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01 00:15

### The big idea: ways out of the *Passiv*

**⚡ SHORTCUT** If something “can be done”, use *sich lassen* or the ending *-bar*. *sein + zu* + infinitive mostly means obligation in official or instruction language; with words like *leicht/schwer/kaum/gut* it expresses possibility.

✓ **Das Problem kann gelöst werden.**

The problem can be solved. (classic *Passiv*)

✓ **Das Problem lässt sich lösen.**

The problem can be solved. (alternative 1)

✓ **Das Problem ist lösbar.**

The problem is solvable. (alternative 2)

02 01:30

### You already do this in English

English works the same way. Instead of “This water can be drunk” you say “This water is *drinkable*”, and instead of “This book can be read” you say “This book *reads* well.” You swap the passive verb for an adjective or an active-looking verb and keep the meaning.

| PASSIVE SENTENCE         | ENGLISH ALTERNATIVE             | GERMAN ALTERNATIVE                    |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| The water can be drunk . | The water is <b>drinkable</b> . | Das Wasser ist trinkbar .             |
| The book can be read .   | The book <b>reads</b> easily .  | Das Buch lässt sich lesen .           |
| The bill must be paid .  | The bill is <b>due</b> .        | <b>Die Rechnung ist zu bezahlen .</b> |

Notice: none of the alternatives contains “werden”. They all look active, but the meaning is passive.

- ✓ **Das lässt sich machen.**  
That can be arranged / done.

03 02:45

### Table: the three main formulas

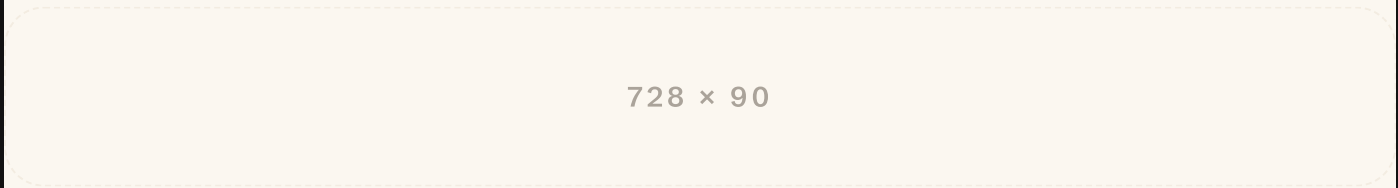
The whole Passiversatz topic revolves around these three structures:

| MEANING                        | FORMULA                       | EXAMPLE                                 |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Possible (kann . . . werden)   | sich lassen + Infinitiv       | Das Auto lässt sich leicht reparieren . |
| Possible (kann . . . werden)   | sein + Adjektiv(-bar / -lich) | Das Auto ist reparierbar .              |
| Possible (kann . . . werden)   | sein + zu + Infinitiv         | <b>Der Fehler ist kaum zu sehen .</b>   |
| Obligatory (muss . . . werden) | sein + zu + Infinitiv         | <b>Die Aufgabe ist zu lösen .</b>       |

The ending “-bar” works just like English “-able” (doable, drinkable).

- ✓ **Dieser Text ist schwer zu verstehen.**  
This text is hard to understand. (It’s difficult to be understood.)

### ADVERTISEMENT



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04 03:45

### The obligation vs. possibility trap

- ✓ **Das Haus muss renoviert werden.**  
The house has to be renovated.



## TRAP

### Misreading sein + zu

When learners see **sein + zu**, they usually assume it means “can be done” (können). But when an authority or an institution uses it, it expresses **a firm obligation** (müssen).

✗ Die Unterlagen sind ~~einzureichen werden~~.

an extra werden

✓ Die Unterlagen **sind einzureichen**.

The documents must be submitted. (correct)

In rules, instructions and invoices this structure is always an order. Occasionally, especially with adjectives like “schwer/leicht”, it can also express “possibility” (es ist schwer zu glauben = it’s hard to believe).

05 04:30

## The part nobody tells you: “man” saves lives

Books always teach you “sich lassen” and “sein zu”. But what Germans actually use most in everyday speech to avoid the Passiv is one tiny word: **man**.

**Hier darf nicht geraucht werden.**

Passiv — correct, but long and stiff (you see it on signs).

✓ **Hier darf man nicht rauchen.**

Active + man (short and natural).

**man** means “one, someone, people”. Even though it gets translated as “Smoking is not allowed here”, the German is completely active. When you get stuck while speaking, reach for “man” straight away.

06 BUILD

## Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

06 05:00

## Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+4

### Take the full test

10 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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