Impersonal *Se* vs. Passive *Se*

Overview

Impersonal *se* and passive *se* constructions look very similar and can be quite confusing to tell apart. Below you'll find handy descriptions of each construction, as well as examples for each.

**Impersonal Se**

Impersonal expressions don’t reference a specific person. Rather, they make reference to people in general and are used to make general statements or questions about what “they,” “one,” or “you” do. That is what makes them impersonal!

You can use impersonal expressions to find out how things are done according to custom, rule, or general consensus. They are also helpful for asking for directions, finding out how to say things properly, asking what the rules are in a specific place, making general statements, and so on.

Se habla español en Uruguay.

They speak Spanish in Uruguay.

¿Cómo se va al teatro?

How does one get to the theater?

Se escribe “pastel” p-a-s-t-e-l.

You spell “pastel” p-a-s-t-e-l.

¿Cómo se dice “table” en español?

How do you say “table” in Spanish?

Se dice que va a llover.

They say it is going to rain.

Impersonal se constructions are always formed with se + a third person singular verb.

**Passive Se**

The passive voice is generally used to talk about something that happened to an object without saying who or what carried out the action. Only transitive verbs (verbs that require a direct object) are used in passive se constructions. It's very common to use the passive se to talk about inanimate (non-living) nouns. It is not common to refer to people using the passive se.

Se comió la torta.

The cake was eaten.

Se escribe el libro en español.

The book is written in Spanish.

Se habla español aquí.

Spanish is spoken here.

Se alquilan kayaks aquí.

Kayaks are rented here.

Se venden carros usados hoy.

Used cars are being sold today.

Passive se constructions can be formed with se + a third person singular verb or a a third person plural verb, depending on what is being discussed.