

Ergative Verbs: Study and Practice

TASK A. Ergative verbs can be transitive or intransitive. Read the sentences. If a verb is transitive, underline the direct object.

1. The leaves blew in the wind.
2. Kevin and some classmates formed a rock band.
3. The man operated the equipment with great skill.
4. I don't operate well under pressure.
5. You should separate that into two groups.
6. Whose phone is vibrating nonstop?
7. You have to thaw the meat first.
8. The lid doesn't close all the way.



TASK B. With ergative verbs, the object of the transitive verb can be the subject of the intransitive verb. Which pairs of sentences prove a verb to be an ergative verb?

- 1a. Sheila slammed the door.
- 1b. The door slammed shut with a bang.
Is "slam" ergative? YES NO
- 2a. The factory produces thousands of cars.
- 2b. Thousands of cars have been produced.
Is "produce" ergative? YES NO
- 3a. The students read two chapters.
- 3b. Two chapters were read before class.
Is "read" ergative? YES NO
- 4a. Could you translate this phrase for me?
- 4b. That phrase doesn't translate into English.
Is "translate" ergative? YES NO



TASK C. Error correction. Decide if each sentence is grammatically correct or not.

- | | | |
|---|---------|-----------|
| 1. The door opened with a creak. | CORRECT | INCORRECT |
| 2. The ship sank. | CORRECT | INCORRECT |
| 3. Can you please show? | CORRECT | INCORRECT |
| 4. The sky was darkened before the storm. | CORRECT | INCORRECT |
| 5. Please empty your pockets. | CORRECT | INCORRECT |

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TASK D. Active and passive verbs can place the focus on the doer or the receiver of the action. An intransitive verb will not have this focus on cause-effect. Which verb fits the situation best? Is more than one choice possible? Discuss your choices.

1. Look at the plane!

- a. It's flying so high.
- b. It's being flown so high.
- c. Someone is flying it really high.



2. Why does your office have a party every year?

- a. A new year always kicks off with company party.
- b. A new year is always kicked off with a company party.
- c. The company kicks off each year with a party.

3. The neighbor's swimming pool is empty. That's strange.

- a. It drained so that repairs could be done.
- b. It was drained so that repairs could be done.
- c. They drained it so that repairs could be done.

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TASK A. Answers.

2. Kevin and some classmates formed a rock band.
3. The man operated the equipment with great skill.
5. You should separate that into two groups.
7. You have to thaw the meat first.

TASK B. Answers.

1. Ergative? **YES**
2. Ergative? **NO**
3. Ergative? **NO**
4. Ergative? **YES**

#2, 3 show examples of active and passive verbs.

TASK C. Answers.

1. The door opened with a creak. **CORRECT**
2. The ship sank. **CORRECT**
3. Can you please show? **INCORRECT ("Show" needs an object. It is transitive.)**
4. The sky was darkened before the storm. **INCORRECT ("Darken" is an ergative verb. The passive form is not needed here. Correct: The sky darkened before the storm.)**
5. Please empty your pockets **CORRECT**

TASK D. Answers.

1. Look at the plane!

a. It's flying so high.

(The focus is on what the plane is doing. Focus on the doer or receiver is unnecessary.)

2. Why does your office have a party every year?

a. A new year always kicks off with company party.

c. The company kicks off each year with a party.

(Sentence A starts with old information and then introduces new information. Focus on the receiver is unnecessary. Focus on the doer, "the company," is appropriate since question is work-related.)

3. The neighbors' swimming pool is empty. That's strange.

b. It was drained so that repairs could be done.

c. They drained it so that repairs could be done.

(Sentence B starts with old information and then introduces new information. Focus on the receiver, "the pool," is logical. Focus on the doer, "they," is also appropriate since it's the neighbors' pool.)

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