

Things done by someone: the French passive

French 3 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: The French passive voice is built with être in the tense of the active verb, plus a past participle that agrees with the subject: Le festival est ouvert par le maire. The agent follows par, or de after verbs of feeling or description. French often avoids the passive by using on or a reflexive verb.

Level: French 3 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Low) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Low, WL 1.1 Interpersonal, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational

How do you form the passive voice in French?

Definition

In a passive sentence the subject receives the action instead of performing it. Le maire ouvre le festival. (active) becomes Le festival est ouvert par le maire. (passive) — The festival is opened by the mayor.

actif



passif



The two nouns swap places.

Rule

Put être in the same tense as the active verb, add the past participle, and make the participle agree with the new subject: la lettre est écrite, les billets sont vendus.

Tense	Active	Passive
present	Le chef prépare le menu.	Le menu est préparé .
imperfect	Le chef préparait le menu.	Le menu était préparé .

Tense	Active	Passive
passé composé	Le chef a préparé le menu.	Le menu a été préparé .
future	Le chef préparera le menu.	Le menu sera préparé .
pluperfect	Le chef avait préparé le menu.	Le menu avait été préparé .



Only être changes tense; the participle stays.

When do you use par and when de?

Examples

- Ce pont a été construit **par** des ouvriers de Nantes. — a real doer, one event.
- La place est entourée **de** cafés. — description, no real doer.
- Le sol était couvert **de** neige. — covered with snow.

Why use the passive at all?

The passive puts the receiver of the action first. It is common in news reports, notices and instructions, because the doer is unknown, obvious or less important than the result. Compare Un voleur a pris mon sac with Mon sac a été volé — My bag was stolen. The second version keeps the focus on the bag, and you can leave the thief out completely. Without par, nobody is blamed.

How can you avoid the passive?

French prefers an active sentence with on when the doer is unknown: On parle français ici. — French is spoken here. A reflexive verb works for general facts: Le vin blanc se boit frais.

Common mistake

Only verbs with a direct object can become passive. *I was given a ticket* is On m'a donné un billet, never J'ai été donné un billet. Also watch the tense: *the door was closed* is était fermée (state) or a été fermée (event).

Culture note

Notre-Dame de Paris was damaged by a fire in April 2019. News reports said La cathédrale a été rouverte au public en décembre 2024. — a typical passive in a headline.

Zoé's tip

Find the object of the active sentence, make it the subject, and read the result aloud: if you hear «être + participe», you have it. Then decide if par is needed.

Key points to remember

- Formula: subject + être (same tense as the active verb) + past participle + par/de + agent.
- The participle agrees in gender and number with the subject: la salle est décorée.
- Par introduces a real doer; de appears after feelings and descriptions (entouré de, couvert de).
- Only verbs with a direct object can become passive; I was given becomes on m'a donné.
- On + active verb replaces many English passives: on parle français.

Things Done by Someone: The French Passive: frequently asked questions

How do you form the passive voice in French?

Use être in the same tense as the active verb, then the past participle. The participle agrees with the subject, and the doer, if named, follows par: la salle a été décorée par les élèves.

When do I use par and when de?

Use par for a real doer of a specific action: écrit par un auteur. Use de after verbs of feeling or description, such as entouré de, couvert de, aimé de.

Does the past participle agree in the passive?

Yes. It always agrees with the subject of the passive sentence, like an adjective: les photos sont prises, le livre est écrit, la porte est fermée.

Why do French speakers prefer on to the passive?

French sounds more natural with an active verb when the doer is unknown or unimportant. On parle français is more common than le français est parlé in everyday speech.

Can any verb be turned into a passive?

No, only verbs that take a direct object. Verbs with an indirect object, like donner à or téléphoner à, need on or a different structure: on m'a téléphoné, not je suis téléphoné.