

Universidad de Los Andes
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THE PASSIVE VOICE

In English, the passive voice is used:

- a) When the **agent** (i.e., the doer) of the action is **unknown** or **unimportant**.¹ This is quite common in science, police and news reports. For example:

Somebody stole my car yesterday.
⇒ My car was stolen yesterday.

Somebody has reported three car accidents today.
⇒ Three car accidents have been reported today.

They build houses using a variety of materials. Someone administered the test two days ago.

⇒ Houses are built using a variety of materials. ⇒ The test was administered two days ago.

People have said that women learn foreign languages faster than men.

⇒ It has been said that women learn foreign languages faster than men.

Somebody has found that long exposure to the sun causes skin cancer.

⇒ It has been found that long exposure to the sun causes skin cancer.

- b) When we wish to **focus on the object** of the active sentence. For example:

The truck driver ran over the dog.

⇒ The dog was run over by the truck driver.

People speak Spanish here.

⇒ Spanish is spoken here.

This store does not accept checks.

⇒ Checks are not accepted by this store.

- c) To make a **statement** sound **impersonal** (perhaps to avoid responsibility when giving bad news, or to sound modest). For example:

We have awarded our staff a 20% pay rise.

⇒ Our staff has been awarded a 20% pay rise.

¹ Words such as *people, somebody, someone, I, you, he, she, we, and they* are considered unimportant subjects because their referents are not clearly specified.

Unfortunately, we will reduce the number of staff by 15%.

⇒ Unfortunately, the number of staff will be reduced by 15%.

- d) When we have **complex sentences**² (i.e., sentences that have a main clause plus a subordinate clause), we can have two options. One is to substitute **IT** for the subject of the main clause and change the verb of the main clause to the passive, leaving the rest of the sentence as it is. The other one is to substitute the subject of the subordinate clause for the subject of the active sentence, change the verb of the main clause to the passive and put the main verb of the subordinate clause in the infinitive with “to”. Examples:

People have said that women learn foreign languages faster than men.

⇒ It has been said that women learn foreign languages master than men.³

OR

⇒ Women have been said to learn foreign languages faster than men.⁴

Somebody has found that long exposure to the sun causes skin cancer.

⇒ It has been found that long exposure to the sun causes skin cancer.

OR

⇒ Long exposure to the sun has been found to cause skin cancer.

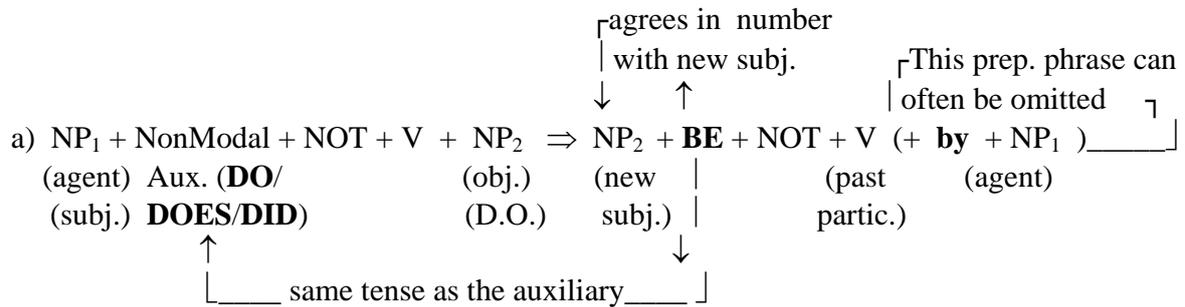
NOTES:

1. **Only** sentences which have **transitive verbs** (i.e., those which have direct objects, or direct and indirect objects) can be changed to the passive. For instance, the sentence *Those fish swim quickly* cannot be changed to the passive because it has an intransitive verb (i.e., it does not have an object).
2. **BE**, or the first auxiliary, of the passive sentence **must** be conjugated in the same tense as the active sentence verb. For instance, as the verb of the active sentence *We chose the students* is in the simple past, in the passive **BE** must be in the simple past, namely, *The students were chosen*.
3. **BE**, or the first auxiliary, of the passive sentence **must** agree in number with the subject of the passive sentence. For example, in the active sentence *The dog often bites the cats*, the subject is singular; therefore, the verb is in third person singular. But in the corresponding passive sentence *The cats are often bitten by the dogs*, the new subject is plural, then **BE** is in third person plural.

² For example, conditional sentences and sentences in reported speech.

³ Notice that in this passive sentence **IT** replaces the active subject in the main clause.

⁴ Notice that in this passive sentence the main verb of the subordinate clause is put in the infinitive (with “to”).



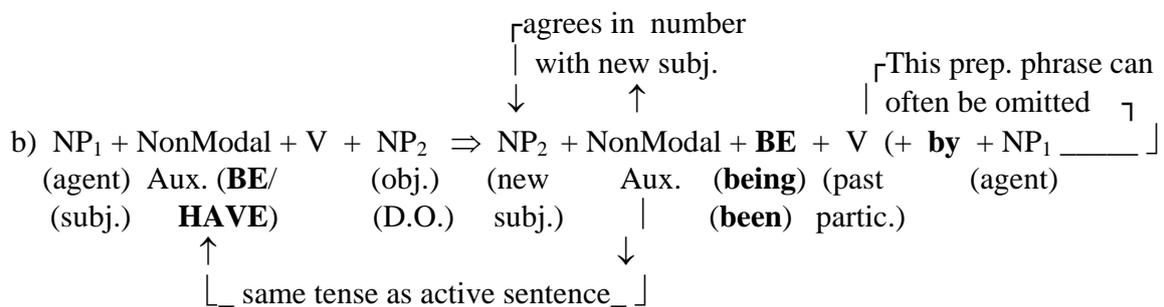
Note: Notice that the auxiliaries **DO/DOES/DID** are not repeated in the passive sentence.

Examples:

She doesn't use apples. ⇒ Apples are not used.

People don't believe John. ⇒ John is not believed.

We didn't kill the birds. ⇒ The birds were not killed.



Examples:

John is writing the reports. ⇒ The reports are being written by John.

They have sent the letter. ⇒ The letter has been sent.

Peter is going to build a house. ⇒ A house is going to be built by Peter.

3. WITH INFINITIVES AND GERUNDS:

