

# Passive Voice — Grammar Capsule

*Companion for the Passive Voice drill (Levels 1–4): par vs. de, the avant que → avant de trap, and on as a passive alternative, worked all the way through.*

## Part 1 — General Passive Voice

The French passive is built the same way English's is: a conjugated form of *être* (in whatever tense the active sentence used) plus the past participle of the main verb, with the agent — if it's named at all — introduced by *par* or *de*. The object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive one; the original subject moves after the preposition, or drops out entirely if who-did-it doesn't matter. *Une équipe a conçu ce programme* → *Ce programme a été conçu par une équipe*. Any transitive verb can do this — general passive mechanics aren't limited to any one family of vocabulary.

### Agreement — always, no exceptions

*Être* + past participle always agrees with the subject, full stop — the same "always agrees" instinct as Reflexive & Pronominal Verbs' Position 4 (*Ce modèle s'est vendu*). Different construction, same reflex: *Ce modèle a été vendu à 10 000 exemplaires* — *vendu* agrees with *modèle* (masculine singular) exactly the way *vendu* does in the reflexive version.

### par vs. de — two different kinds of agent

| Agent type                         | Preposition | What it marks                                       | Example                                                   |
|------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Specific, one-time action          | <b>par</b>  | An identifiable agent actually performing an action | <i>Le pont a été construit par une entreprise locale.</i> |
| State, feeling, standing condition | <b>de</b>   | Not a one-off act — an ongoing state                | <i>Ce professeur est respecté de tous ses élèves.</i>     |

*De-agent is comparatively rare — reserved mostly for a small family of state/feeling verbs (aimer, respecter, détester, apprécier) and set phrases (entouré de mystère, couvert de neige). A handful of verbs can go either way depending on framing: Le village est protégé par un mur (par — a built structure performing a one-time act) is a different sentence from a standing-condition reading of the same verb — don't force a false de-agent pair where the sentence is really describing an action.*

**Why aimer/respecter/détester/apprécier take de, not par:** Loving, respecting, hating, and appreciating aren't one-time actions someone performs on the subject — they're standing emotional states, so they follow the de-agent rule (state/feeling) rather than the par-agent rule (a specific act by an identifiable agent). In everyday spoken French you'll increasingly hear *par* with these same verbs too (*aimé par ses sujets*) — that's newer, more relaxed usage creeping in. *De* is the traditional, textbook-correct default, and the one this drill expects.

## Same-subject clauses: *avant que* → *avant de*

This is a general French rule, not specific to the passive — but it shows up constantly inside passive sentences, because making a sentence passive changes which noun is its subject. The rule itself: *avant que* + subjunctive is only correct when the subordinate clause's subject is different from the main clause's subject. The moment the two subjects match, French drops the subjunctive clause entirely and switches to *avant de* + infinitive instead.

**Watch what happens when you make it passive:** *Des ouvriers spécialisés laveront cette laine avant qu'elle soit triée* — active voice, two different subjects (*des ouvriers* vs. *elle*), so *avant que* + subjunctive is correct here. Make the main clause passive and *cette laine* becomes the subject of BOTH clauses at once, so the same-subject rule kicks in: *Cette laine sera lavée par des ouvriers spécialisés avant d'être triée*. Keeping *avant qu'elle soit triée* once the sentence is passive would now be wrong — once the two subjects match, the subjunctive clause has to go.

Not every passive construction collides this way, though. If the subordinate clause's subject is a genuinely different noun from whatever gets promoted to subject — an exam *of* the bill isn't the bill itself, a copy *of* the letter isn't the letter itself — *avant que* stays correct on both sides. *Le comité examine le rapport avant qu'il soit approuvé par le conseil* → *Le rapport est examiné par le comité avant qu'il soit approuvé par le conseil* (le comité's *examen* ≠ le rapport, so *que* never flips). Level 2 of this drill trains exactly this contrast — recognizing the collision when it happens, and recognizing when it doesn't.

## Part 2 — On as a Passive Alternative

*On* is a third-person indefinite pronoun with no single English equivalent — depending on context it can mean "one," "people," "you" (in the impersonal sense), "someone," "they," or — extremely commonly in everyday spoken French — simply "we." Because its subject is already grammatically indefinite, swapping a passive sentence for an *on*-sentence removes the need for *être* + participle + agent entirely: *Ce modèle est vendu partout* becomes *On vend ce modèle partout*, with nothing lost and one whole grammatical layer gone. This is the single most common way spoken French avoids a heavy passive, and it covers three distinct everyday jobs, not just this one.

| Function             | What it does                                                       | Example                                                                 |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Indefinite / generic | "One," "people," "you" — no specific agent in mind                 | <i>On dit que ce restaurant est excellent.</i>                          |
| Passive substitute   | Swaps a heavier passive for the far more common spoken alternative | <i>Ce modèle est vendu partout.</i> → <i>On vend ce modèle partout.</i> |
| Colloquial "nous"    | Everyday spoken French's default word for "we"                     | <i>On y va?</i> (instead of the more formal <i>Allons-nous-y?</i> )     |

## Two agreement traps

| Trap                             | Rule                                                           | Example                                                                                |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Verb person                      | Always 3rd-person-singular, even when <i>on</i> means "we"     | <i>On va</i> , never <i>on vont</i> — even for a group                                 |
| Participle / adjective agreement | Textbook default is masculine singular, even for a known group | <i>On est content</i> (not <i>contente/contents/contentes</i> ) — the textbook default |

*The honest nuance: real usage varies more than a clean two-option split suggests. Feminine-plural agreement is a well-attested informal exception when the speakers are known to be women (on est arrivées, on était fatiguées) — common enough in casual spoken French to expect, not just a curiosity. And masculine-plural agreement turns up too, without even that clear a trigger (on est débordés). Treat all of these as attested variants worth recognizing, not a single clean rule with one named exception.*

## Part 3 — Compare & Contrast Cheat Sheet

| You want to say                                      | Right                                                         | Wrong (and why)                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The equipment is checked before it's sold.           | <i>L'équipement est vérifié avant d'être vendu.</i>           | <i>...avant qu'il soit vendu</i> — once <i>l'équipement</i> is the passive subject, <i>il</i> refers back to that same noun, so the subjunctive clause has to collapse. |
| They're hiring this inspector.                       | <i>On engage cet inspecteur.</i>                              | <i>Cet inspecteur est engagé par la commune</i> isn't wrong, just heavier than how a French speaker would actually say it.                                              |
| They arrived late. (a group of women, casual speech) | <i>On est arrivées en retard.</i> (attested informal variant) | Insisting this must be <i>on est arrivé</i> — the textbook default is real, but so is this exception.                                                                   |
| What are we doing tonight?                           | <i>Qu'est-ce qu'on fait ce soir?</i>                          | <i>Qu'est-ce que nous faisons ce soir?</i> is correct but sounds formal/written next to how this is actually said.                                                      |

**Ties to the rest of the site:** this drill's companion, *Cause & Effect Verbs*, covers the causative toolkit (*causer, entraîner, être causé par, être dû à, résulter de...*) — a family of verbs whose entire job is naming a cause-effect relationship, some putting the cause in the subject seat and some the effect — plus the causative-swap register upgrade away from a heavy effect-as-subject passive. Reflexive & Pronominal Verbs' Position 4 ("Remove the Agent") covers a third way to avoid a heavy passive (*se vendre, se trouver, se fabriquer*), and its items appear in this drill's own Mixed Review alongside Levels 1–3. Same underlying goal — avoid or reshape a heavy passive — three different everyday tools for it.