

The passive with modals, future and infinitive forms

Gosia from **Poland** writes:



Could you explain to me how **be** is used in this sentence:

*Sofia Coppola has become only the third woman to **be** nominated for the best director at the Oscars.*

I understand the meaning, but I have a problem with the use. When should I use **be** and when not? I meet this construction in sentences very often.

Roger Woodham replies:

The passive with modals, future and infinitive forms

This is an example of a **passive** form. We use the passive when it is not so important to know who the agent of the action is. Here we are not so interested in knowing who nominated Sofia Coppola for best director. Our attention is focused on the object, the

person who has been nominated. So instead of saying:

The American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has nominated Sofia Coppola for best director.

we say:

Sofia Coppola has been nominated for best director.

Note that the object of an active verb becomes the subject of a passive verb:

The People **is published** on Sundays.

My curtains **are being dry-cleaned**.

My passport **has been stolen**.

The vase **was sold** for £5,000.

With modals and with infinitive forms, the passive is formed with **be + past participle** or **have been + past participle**. With future forms it is constructed with **be + past participle** or **being + past participle**.

Future forms: will be / is going to be / is being / is to be + past participle

The prisoner **will be held** indefinitely in a maximum security jail.

He **will never be released**.

The Council House Tower Blocks in Manchester **are to be knocked down**.

The tenants **are being offered** alternative accommodation.

The cinema in the High Street **is going to be converted** into a dance hall.

Modals: can be / could be + past participle

We use these forms to talk about present and past ability or possibility in the passive voice:

My professor has told me that I **may be invited** to give the keynote speech at the conference this year.

The road over the mountains **might be closed** if this rain turns to snow.

If you're all keen to make an early start, the meeting **could be brought** forward to nine o' clock.

Modals: must be / ought to be / should be + past participle

We use these forms to talk about necessity and advisability in the passive voice:

You can't expect her to work if she's not well. She **must be given** time off.

You're not supposed to walk on that type of floor in high heels. It shouldn't **be allowed**.

He **ought to be rewarded** for handing in all the money to the police.

Modals: must've been / should've been / could have been + past participle

Note that when we are using modals to talk about most past situations in the passive voice, be + past participle becomes have been + past participle:

The car was clearly defective and **should never have been** rented out.

That necklace is no longer in the shop window so it **must have been** sold.

He insisted on playing American football wearing only a T-shirt and shorts and **could've been** seriously injured.

Infinitives: to be / to have been + past participle

There is sometimes little difference in meaning whether **be** or **have been** passive forms are used. On other occasions, **be** is more clearly associated with present time and **have been** is more clearly associated with past time:

Sofia Coppola is only the third woman **to be nominated** for best director.

Sofia Coppola is only the third woman **to have been nominated** for best director.

The prisoners **are expected to be released** today.

He **is to be congratulated** on passing his exam.

He **was to have been rewarded** for handing in the stolen goods until it was discovered that he was involved with the criminal gang.