

Appropriate use of the Passive

When is the passive appropriate?

1) When you don't know who did it, it isn't important who did it, or everybody knows who did it. This is especially true in descriptions of processes.

My car was stolen.

In the mountain highlands, water is collected in the traditional way. When fog develops, droplets of water are trapped in nets. The water is then filtered and piped into storage tanks, where it is chemically treated to kill disease-causing organisms.

Rice is grown in Asia.

Passive is also used when you want to hide who did it:

"Mistakes were made," said the president's spokesperson.

2) When a shift from active to passive makes it easier for the reader to follow a string of long sentences (a type of cohesion), or for emphasis:

The president must decide whether to tell the truth to the American people. This decision must be made soon.

America needs to improve its educational standards. But these standards can only be improved if parents take responsibility for what happens at home.

Scientists have found that much of our behavior is determined by our genes.

Task: OK in passive or not? Change it if you think it's better in the active. Feel free to reword for clarity.

- 1) Funds must be found so that a new graduate student dorm can be built.
- 2) The heat-resistant tiles had to be redesigned because they had been too easily damaged by micro meteorites.
- 3) When they plan a new housing project, city planners must consider the impact on the surrounding neighborhood.
- 4) "For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled." – Richard Feynman

(extra points if you know who said this!)

