Using the passive in writing

As you know, we use the passive frequently when we describe processes, and when we write academic texts or reports. In addition, we often use the passive in newspaper reports. Basically, we use the passive for the following reasons:

- We want to describe an action, but we do not know who performed the action (this explains why it is often used in news reports)
- The action is more important in the text than the person who performed it (this explains why it is often used when describing processes, and why it is used in news reports)
- We want to give the impression of being objective or distanced from the action that takes place (this explains why it is often used in academic texts and reports)
- We want to make generalisations that are not limited to the actions of individuals (this also explains why it is often used in describing processes and in academic reports).

Whether you use the active or the passive in your sentences is a matter of style or custom. In the United States, school students are often taught that the passive voice is incorrect, perhaps because if it is used inappropriately it does look and sound rather strange. However, in Australia and the UK, the passive voice is more common, particularly in the contexts described in the dot points above.

A. Example of the passive used to describe a process: Only the highest quality materials are used in the production of our 'Teale' brand of furniture. The wood is carefully selected from trees grown in our own plantations. The individual components of each piece of furniture are cut at our specially designed mill, and are then assembled individually by hand. Each piece is tested for durability and strength. The whole process is supervised by one of our team of professionally trained craftsmen and women. Only when they are completely happy with the product will it be approved for sale through one of our distribution outlets.

Activity 1: Check the uses of the passive. Read the text above once more and make a note of all the examples of the passive that you can find.

Activity 2: Writing about a process. Now it's your turn. Write a paragraph describing the processes involved in creating one of the products below. You don't need to worry about being completely factually correct, provided that you have the main details.

- A pair of leather shoes
- A candle
- A book
- An item of clothing

B. Example of the passive used in research reports: In the study, the participants were weighed at the beginning of the dieting period. Of the 500 volunteers, 400 were considered to be overweight and the remaining 100 were within the normal limits for their heights, gender and age. They were then all weighed at periods throughout the six months, and a journal was kept on their eating habits during this time. At the end of the research period, the results were collated and the total data were analysed.
Activity 3: Write a paragraph summarising a research report. Read the notes below and construct a short report from the information provided.

- **Purpose** – to find out how often people watch TV
- **Research** – survey of 1500 people in Japan, and 1500 in Australia; 25 questions about viewing habits
- **Dates** – covered month of May, survey complete in August
- **Results** – published December, people in Australia watch 4 hours of TV per day, people in Japan watch 3 hours of TV per day

C. Example of the passive used in a news report: Three people were killed and one child was badly injured in a collision between two cars on the Sturt Highway yesterday. The fatal accident occurred just before 6pm during the one of the storms that have hit the area over the last two days. The police have not yet released the names of the victims because the relatives of the occupants of one car have not yet been informed.

Activity 4: Check the uses of the passive. Read the news report above once more and make a note of all the examples of the passive that you can find.

Activity 5: Write your own news summary. Read the notes below and construct a news paragraph on the events described.

- Fire at warehouse - $2,000,000 damage
- Destruction to most of the building and 90% of the stock inside
- Took 2 hours to extinguish the fire
- Happened at 2am on Sunday morning
- Possibly arson?