Using the Passive [Fact sheet]

The passive is a combination of the verb TO BE (in varying forms such as is, are, was, were, will be, has been, is being, etc) plus a verb ending in –ed (or an irregular ending like –en)

e.g.  Living organisms are classified into plants and animals.  
      World War 1 was caused by many factors.

1. In essays or reports the passive can sometimes be useful (contrary to what word processor grammars like to suggest). In fact, there may be specific reasons why writers choose to use the passive.

   One use of the passive is to allow a choice of word order in sentences. Compare the positions of evidence and case in these sentences with and without a passive:

   NO PASSIVE: The evidence proves the case.

   PASSIVE:  The case is proved by the evidence.

   We often need a particular word order in order to make the sentence “flow” better after what is said before it.

2. The other use of the passive is to avoid mentioning who or what performs an action (the “subject” of the action).

   e.g.  Readings were taken at regular intervals  
         (rather than The scientists took readings at regular intervals).

         An elementary error has been made  
         (rather than His boss has made an elementary error).

3. There are many reasons for not mentioning the subject of an action. For example, who does the action may not be important, or you may wish to avoid drawing attention to the subject. In academic writing, the use of the passive is a way of avoiding the use of ‘informal’ subjects, such as we.

   e.g.  The data was analysed over three months  
         (rather than I/We analysed the data over three months).