

**A** We typically use a passive rather than an active in the following situations.

- ☆ Using a passive allows us to omit the agent (= the subject of the corresponding active sentence) by leaving out the prepositional phrase with **by**. We prefer passives when the agent:
  - is not known:  My office **was broken into** when I was on holiday.
  - is 'people in general':  An order form **can be found** on page 2.
  - is unimportant:  He **is thought** to be somewhere in Russia.
  - is obvious:  She **is being treated** in hospital. (the agent is clearly 'medical staff')
- ☆ In factual writing (e.g. describing procedures or processes) we often omit the agent, and use passives:
  - Nuclear waste will still be radioactive even after 20,000 years, so it **must be disposed of** very carefully. It **can be stored** as a liquid in stainless-steel containers which **are encased** in concrete. The most dangerous nuclear waste **can be turned** into glass which **will be stored** in deep underground mines.
- ☆ In informal contexts, particularly in conversation, we often use active sentences with a subject such as **people, somebody / someone, something, they, we, or you** even when we do not know who the agent is. In more formal contexts, we often prefer to use a passive so that we can avoid any mention of an agent. Compare:
  - They're installing** the new computer system next month. *and*
  - The new computer system **is being installed** next month. (*more formal*)

**B** Note also that some verbs have related nouns which express the same meaning. These nouns can be used as the subject of passive sentences, with a new passive verb introduced. Compare the example above and:

- The **installation** of the new computer system **will be completed** by next month.

**C** In English we usually prefer to put the topic (what is already being talked about) at the beginning of a sentence (or clause) and a comment on that topic at the end. Choosing the passive often allows us to do this. Compare these two texts and note where the topic (in *italics*) is placed in the second sentence of each. The second text uses a passive where the emphasis is on the (safety) valves:

- The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. The Boron Group in Germany manufactured *all the valves*.
- The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. *All the valves* were manufactured by the Boron Group in Germany.

Using the passive allows us to put long subjects at the end of a sentence. So, for example:

- I was surprised** by Dev's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney.

is more natural than 'Dev's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney surprised me', although the choice can depend on considerations of style and context.

**D** Instead of making a **that-clause** the subject of a passive sentence, it is normal to use an **it-clause** (see also Unit 25):

- Everybody **believed** (that) the plan would fail. (*active*)
- It was believed** that the plan would fail. (*passive*) *is more natural than*
- That the plan would fail* **was believed** by everybody.

## Exercises

24.1 Write passive sentences about the development of an Olympic Games site starting with the italicised words. A & Appendix 2

1 They built *the main stadium* in under three years.  
*The main stadium was built in under three years.*

2 They have designed *the main stadium* to accommodate many different sports.

3 They will take down *the temporary stands* after the Games.

4 They will have completed *the basketball arena* by the end of May.

5 They are holding *the rowing competition* on the River Nene.

6 They had completed *the athletics track* only a year after the city got the Olympics.

7 They were using *the handball venue* as a warehouse until a year ago.

8 They should have finished *the badminton arena* by now.

24.2 Rewrite these sentences beginning with a noun formed from the italicised verb (with the if necessary). Use a passive form of the verb in brackets, and make any other necessary changes. B

- 1 They will *consider* the issue at next week's meeting. (*give*)  
*Consideration will be given to the issue at next week's meeting.*
- 2 They will *appoint* a new managing director next week. (*make*)
- 3 People have *accused* the local council of corruption. (*make*)
- 4 They *demolished* the building in only two days. (*complete*)
- 5 They will *present* the trophy after the speeches. (*make*)
- 6 Local residents will certainly *resist* the proposed new industrial area. (*expect*)

24.3 Complete the text with appropriate forms (active or passive) of the verbs in brackets. A-D

Slowly but surely the coastline of Britain (1) *is being worn away* (*wear away*) by an advancing sea. The country which once 'ruled the waves' now (2) ..... (*rule*) by them, with huge forces threatening to destroy vast areas of human and wildlife habitat. Already some of Britain's last wild, natural areas (3) ..... (*disappear*), and experts (4) ..... (*fear*) that this is just the beginning. It (5) ..... (*estimate*) that there will be a 38-55 cm rise in average sea levels by the year 2100. According to the Department of the Environment, during the next 50 years at least 10,000 hectares of farmland (6) ..... (*turn into*) mud flats and salt marshes by the increases in sea levels. Rather than trying to prevent the erosion, the present government (7) ..... (*use*) a method of 'managed retreat' by creating new defences further inland and allowing low-lying coastal farmland (8) ..... (*abandon*) to the sea. However, many of the country's major cities could also (9) ..... (*affect*). London, Bristol and Cardiff all (10) ..... (*expect*) severe flooding as our sea defences (11) ..... (*destroy*) by the rising tides.