When to use Passive Voice

We generally expect effective writing to be vigorous and direct. In nearly all circumstances, the active voice achieves vigor and directness better than the passive voice, because in the active voice the doer of the action, the actor, is the center of the sentence. In some cases, however, using the passive voice makes sense. These are some guidelines as to when passives are often used appropriately:

Passive construction is appropriate:

1. When the actor (the person or thing doing the action of the verb) is redundant (i.e., easy to supply and therefore not expressed).

Grapes are grown in California. (The actor here is "vintners," which is not necessary.)

2. When the writer wants to emphasize the receiver or result of the action.

Six people were killed in the fire. (As opposed to: The fire killed six people).

3. When the writer wants to be tactful or evasive by not mentioning the agent.

Kristin was given some bad advice. (As opposed to: David gave Kristin some bad advice.)

4. When the writer wants to make a statement sound more objective without revealing the source of the information.

It is believed that she will announce her resignation today.

5. When the writer wants to retain the same grammatical subject in successive clauses, even though the function of the noun changes form.

Kristin finished her paper, but she was exhausted by the task.

*From George Mason U. Writing Center:
http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/nicepass.html