What is a passive voice verb?
Consider the following sentences:

Active Voice: The cat scratched the baby.
Passive Voice: The baby was scratched by the cat.

The active voice sentence follows the sentence order of subject, verb, object. The subject performs the action; the verb expresses the action; the object receives the action. The flow of the sentence is forward—moving from the subject to the object; consequently, active voice verbs propel the reader forward through the text.

The passive voice sentence flip-flops the subject and object. The subject becomes the recipient of the action. The agent performing the action in the example above is expressed in the prepositional phrase by the cat.

Another way to discuss the difference between active and passive relates to the focus of the sentence. The active voice sentence focuses on the agent performing the action, whereas passive voice sentence focuses on the person or thing affected by the action.

How can a writer identify passive voice verbs?
The form of the passive voice verb will always consist of the following elements:

- a form of to be* + the past participle form of a verb (the ed/en/t form)

  The baby was scratched.
  I will be taken to the airport.
  All funds were spent by the committee.

Often (not always) the agent performing the action is the object of a prepositional phrase beginning with by.

  The players were injured by the other team.
  I will be taken to the airport by my boss.

*forms of to be: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been

Why is active voice most often preferred?
➤Conciseness
Active voice involves fewer words and is more direct.

  Active: The waiter dropped the tray.
  Passive: The tray was dropped by the waiter.
Active voice is direct and clearly states the relationship between subject and action.

Active: The review committee denied your request for funding.
Passive: Your request for funding has been denied by the review committee.

Active voice focuses the reader’s attention on the agent performing the action.

Active: The defendant committed the atrocious crimes.
Passive: The atrocious crimes were committed by the defendant.

Active voice propels the action forward through the sentence and onto the next.

Active: I shot the sheriff.
Passive: The sheriff was shot by me.

When should a writer use passive voice?

√ The agent performing the action is unimportant.
   The pyramids were built thousands of years ago.

√ The agent performing the action is unknown.
   Several robberies were committed during the night.

√ The agent performing the action is common knowledge.
   George Bush was elected in 2004.

√ The writer desires to control the focus of the sentence:
   1) to de-emphasize the agent’s role in the action
       Mistakes were made. [The author cleverly does not mention who made the mistakes.]
       The alarm was triggered by my son. [Focus shifts away from the son’s responsibility.]
   2) to emphasize the party receiving the action
       Jack was kicked by Jill. [The writer may wish to emphasize Jack’s victimhood.]

Where can a writer find more information about the passive voice?
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/1/
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html