Module 1 Unit 2
Grammar: The Passive

The Rule

The choice of active or passive determines what a sentence is basically about and must suit the purpose of the piece of writing.

Every sentence has one or more participants - people/things etc. that are directly involved in the event or situation described by the sentence. An important participant in a sentence describing an action is the actor - the one who performs the action.

It's often the case that we choose the actor as the topic of our sentence (what the sentence is basically about). If we choose the actor as our topic, we use an active sentence, i.e. we put the actor up front in subject position followed by an active verb.

Example: The fishermen caught the shark.

If we choose a participant other than the actor as our topic, we use a passive sentence, i.e. we put that participant up front in subject position followed by a passive verb.

Example: The shark was caught by the fishermen.

The choice between using an active or a passive sentence depends on which participant you choose as your topic.

You can only make a sentence passive when there is more than one participant i.e. when the verb is transitive.