Background knowledge

The two main grammatical concepts introduced in Year 6 are explained below.

The passive voice

Verbs in the passive voice are often used to show something being done to something else. In a sentence in the active voice, the subject of the sentence generally comes first – *I love tofu. I* is the subject of this sentence; *tofu* is the object. To put that sentence into the passive, you need to reverse the order of the subject and the object and put *tofu* first. The resulting sentence in the passive voice is *Tofu is loved by me*. This particular example sounds quite unnatural, and when using the passive voice generally, it's often worth asking if the meaning would be better expressed by converting the sentence into the active voice. However, the passive can be useful in achieving particular effects. For example:

- Compare *The meeting was attended by forty people* with *Forty people attended the meeting*. In the first sentence (in the passive voice) the tone is more formal, and the meeting is mentioned first, which gives it more importance. In the second (active voice) sentence, the people come first and therefore the emphasis is on them rather than on the meeting.

- Compare *The window was broken* with *I broke the window*. In this example, the passive voice allows the writer to mention the incident without saying who broke the window. When the sentence is in the active voice, it's essential to state *who* broke it (even if you only hedge your bets and say *somebody*). So writers sometimes use the passive when they want to talk about something happening, without stating who or what might have been responsible for it.

The subjunctive

The subjunctive is most often used in formal contexts, and it is useful when you want to write about things that are not or may not be true, or when you are writing about wishes and aspirations. In the subjunctive we use *were* and not *was* in the past tense – for instance:

- *If I **were** in charge, we would all spend February in the Bahamas.* (But I'm not in charge, so it's *were*, not *was*.)

- *If only my jumper **were** warmer, I wouldn't need to put the heating on.* (But it's too thin, so I use *were*, not *was*.)

- *I wish Immanuel **were** more polite.* (Again, he's not polite, so it's *were*, not *was*.)

In the present tense, the subjunctive uses *be* instead of *am*, *are* or *is*:

- *James prefers that his children **be** silent at the table.* (However, in the real world, this is not always the case, so it's *be*, not *are*.)

- *Politeness requires that you **be** appreciative when given a present.* (But you might choose not to be, so it's *be*, not *are*.)

- *She demanded that I **be** respectful to her son.* (But she can't really control whether I'm respectful or not, so it's *be*, not *am*.)

- *I would like to ask that the table **be** cleared before I sit down.* (I can make that request, but it won't necessarily be carried out, so it's *be*, not *is*.)