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Passive Voice

"Coming out of the subway, the tall buildings of New York were seen for the first time" is a type of sentence that most of us encountered in high-school English classes. Few of us caught on immediately to what was incorrect, but once the teacher had finally got it into our heads that the author did not intend to say that the tall buildings were coming out of the subway and that such a construction was called a "dangling modifier," many of us began to look for similar sentences just for the laughs.

In the editorial office we still see gerunds and participles used in this manner, and it is discouraging. However, we have noticed that authors who prefer the passive voice fall into the trap more often than those who prefer the active voice. Once an author has written a few sentences in the passive voice, it seems to be easy for him to conclude the paragraph with a sentence like, "Adding acid drop by drop, a white precipitate was obtained."

When an author does this, we are obliged to make a change. Several courses are open to us. If most of the article is written in the passive voice, we try to change the phrase to an adverbial clause. For example, we may alter the wording to "When acid was added drop by drop, a white precipitate was obtained"—that is, we put the clause in the passive voice too. Or we can use a prepositional phrase beginning, for example, with *by*: "By addition of acid drop by drop, a white precipitate was obtained." There are other appropriate ways to correct the error. Sometimes, however, all these solutions are awkward, or else much of the article is written in the active voice. Under these circumstances, we find that it is necessary to shift the independent clause to the active voice: "Adding acid drop by drop, I [or we] obtained a white precipitate."

Occasionally the last solution disturbs authors, for some believe that the use of *I* or *we* is immodest, and others believe that this usage inserts a subjective element into the paper. *Science* has been trying to discourage the former view. Perhaps the authors who hold the latter view prefer the passive voice in general because they think it makes their writing more "scientific"—that is, that it makes their writing more "objective" and less "subjective," particularly when they are stating verifiable experimental facts.

We have no intention of joining those who belabor the use of the passive voice. Perhaps the active voice is, in general, more robust and more direct, and perhaps it does require a few (usually a very few) fewer words, but the passive voice can also be used well. Our chief objection to the passive voice is that it sometimes seems to make authors forget to watch for dangling modifiers. Such oversights can lead to something more undesirable than lack of grammatical exactness; they can also lead to scientific inexactness.—
R. V. O.