

Of Weak Verbs and Strong Editors

The victim—whether of an accident or a deliberate assault, it would be hard to say—lay on a white sheet on the table before her, inert, bloodless, barely alive. She sighed, recalling the many others her professional skills had been called on to save that were just like this one—otherwise normal, potentially vigorous, full of the promise of vivid expression, but rendered impotent and nearly lifeless by the carelessness of an insensitive writer. She looked at the sentence again. It read in part:

"The accumulation of lipid in arterial walls occurred because . . ."

Fortunately, the necessary procedure was straightforward. Working swiftly, the editor cut away and discarded the malignant "occurred". She removed the "-ion" that had been grafted onto the verb "accumulate", disguising it as an abstract noun, added "-ed" for the past tense, and moved the now healthy verb into its proper position, after "lipid". Deftly, she snipped away the unnecessary "the" and "of" and read the edited phrase:

"Lipid accumulated in arterial walls because . . ."

Another sentence restored to health. Stretching her cramped fingers, the editor moved on wearily but with satisfaction to the next case.

For some reason, many authors vitiolate their own writing by turning what would normally be the verb in a sentence into a noun—often by adding "-ion"—and using instead a weak active verb, such as "occurs", or a weak passive, such as "is done", "is performed", or "is carried out". Why they do this is a mystery to me, but it seems to have something to do with the daft but widespread notion that to be taken seriously, scientific writing must first be drained of all force, its muscles and sinews slashed, until every vestige of life has been eradicated. Any hint of human agency must be banished (hence, for example, the ubiquitous passive and the taboo against "I"), so that the writing may seem to float to earth from Heaven, like one of El Greco's languid, attenuated, and sexless angels. The effect, however, is not the sublimity of an El Greco but rather the loss of clarity as well as vigor. Correcting this defect can do more to revive a moribund style than almost any other editorial maneuver I know.

And now, Reader, it's your turn. Using the operative technique described above, correct these cases of the weak-verb syndrome, drawn from actual manuscripts:

Treatment failure occurred in 45 patients in the radiotherapy group.

The interpretation of the subgroup analysis has to be done very cautiously.

Protection of pregnant mice occurs without the benefit of chorionic gonadotropin.

It would be better if the government provided loan forgiveness for medical school graduates.

Twenty-four significant asthma exacerbations occurred during the treatment period.

The data coordinating center performed a second data entry for data verification.

Look on page 71 to see how we edited these sentences for the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The WordWatcher welcomes your comments and suggestions. You can reach her by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The Word-Watcher, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 10 Shattuck St, Boston MA 02115; by fax, at 617-739-0723; and by e-mail, at lloviglio@edit.nejm.org.

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