

## Still writing in passive voice?

KEN MAHRER, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Denver, USA

Recently a friend gave me a copy of "GeoCurmudgeon," an essay by John P. Bachner in *Geo-Strata* (American Society of Civil Engineers Geo-Institute, May/June 2005, reprinted in *TLE* with permission). Ironically, the person who gave me this clever instantiation (look it up; it's a good word) didn't get it. If you don't understand it either, I'll clarify at the end. So start reading:

The passive voice is disliked by many because convoluted sentence structure, the understanding of which is not easily achieved, is lead to by it. Also, the elimination of important information may be caused, because, when the passive voice is used, the entity by which action is taken—i.e., the subject of the verb—may not be identified. "A good thing may be realized by that," it is believed by some, "because efficiency is promoted. As long as the appearance of a complete sentence is achieved, time does not have to be spent to learn by whom or what action described in the sentence was taken." Unfortunately, risk is elevated by that, and, that being the case, it might be asked by one, "Why is the passive voice still so widely used by geoprofessionals?"

The genesis of many engineering firms can be traced to firms that were founded in the 1870s. Proper writing was taught to those firms' employees by the firms' principals. Later, when new firms were started by some of those employees, the need for their new hires to be taught how to write by them was realized. What was taught by them was what was learned by them; i.e., proper writing c. 1870.

Later, around 1900, their own was gone out on by some of the second-generation employees. New employees were hired by them and writing skills were taught to those new employees by the principals of the new companies. The writing skills of 1870 were taught, of course. And, so it went, from generation to generation, until eventually, it is supposed by me, the first geotechnical engineering firms also were affected. Frankly, it was thought by me that better would have been known by the principals of those firms, and that the passive voice would not have been adopted by them. Apparently, however, the passive voice was regarded by them as something whose desirability was not exceeded even by sliced bread, their current use of the writing style of 1870 thus being explained. Regrettably, because the same style is used by almost all, an image of sameness is created by them.

"But major differences are exhibited by it," it is whined by many geoprofessionals.

"How is it that claims can be made by you that the achievement of differences is accomplished when the opposite is demonstrated by an overwhelming amount of poorly written evidence?" It is asked by people whose identities are hidden by passive constructions. Regarding you all as the same, as commodities, is something your clients are invited by you to do because the same is sounded by all your reports and proposals. Were the active voice to be used by at least two or three of you, it is continued, "a real difference would be achieved by those two or three."

"Our legal liability might be increased by doing that," it is said. "The fact that professionals are employed by us may be discovered by attorneys."

"Ha ha ha," it is laughed. "The high level of dumbness attained by such a thought cannot be believed by us."

"Well, then," it is said, "use of the active voice would not be liked by client representatives."

"Why not?" it is asked. "What would be written by you

would be understood so much more easily. An awakening should be achieved by you. Thought is processed by people in the active voice. Speech is uttered by people in the active voice. Wouldn't just plain old common sense be made by the idea that ease, clarity, and speed of writing would be realized by writing in the active voice?"

"How could that be done?"

"Using 'we' could be tried. After all, firms are composed of people, so accuracy would be achieved by 'we' as the subject of a verb. Instead of 'The tests were conducted,' 'We conducted tests' could be written."

"Never!" it is shrieked. "Scientificness no longer would be incorporated into the writing if the active voice were used. Maturity and experience are required for proficiency in the passive voice to be demonstrated. We could be understood by fifth-graders."

"You cannot be believed by me. Writing is done by people so communication can be achieved, not so an image can be conveyed. And besides, if what is written can be understood by fifth-graders, clarity has been arrived at and a good thing is comprised by that."

"An understanding of how that can be said by you is not understood by us. As far as it is concerned by us, knowledge of what is being talked about by you has not been attained by you. The hallmark of a true professional is demonstrated only by the passive voice." And with that, their heels are turned on by them, an absence of their presence thus being achieved. "They'll change," it is thought by me, "but not for a long, long time."

Either you enjoyed Bachner's tongue-in-cheek or you didn't get it. If it's the latter, let me clue you in. Bachner has taken a straightforward topic—the need for active voice in technical writing—and written it in passive voice! Because of the passive voice, the writing is awkward, turgid, convoluted, and makes a simple discussion hard to follow! Understand? That's why active voice is preferred. **TLE**

Corresponding author: kmahrer@do.usbr.gov