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## Inventing Viruses

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### Abstract

In the nineteenth century, "virus" commonly meant an agent (usually unknown) that caused disease in inoculation experiments. By the 1890s, however, some disease-causing agents were found to pass through filters that retained the common bacteria. Such an agent was called "filterable virus," the best known being the virus that caused tobacco mosaic disease. By the 1920s there were many examples of filterable viruses, but no clear understanding of their nature. However, by the 1930s, the term "filterable virus" was being abandoned in favor of simply "virus," meaning an agent other than bacteria. Visualization of viruses by the electron microscope in the late 1930s finally settled their particulate nature. This article describes the ever-changing concept of "virus" and how virologists talked about viruses. These changes reflected their invention and reinvention of the concept of a virus as it was revised in light of new knowledge, new scientific values and interests, and new hegemonic technologies.

**Keywords:** construction; filterable; plaque; ultramicrobe.

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