

~~Enact Demolition on Demolish~~ Nominalizations, Let Verbs Propel Your Prose

It happens to all of us. A piece of writing drags—it's boring, cumbersome and fails to read smoothly—and we don't know why. We see no grammatical errors, and we've done our best to ferret out any gratuitous adverbs or adjectives. Nonetheless, somehow the writing is as snooze-inducing and the meaning is as impenetrable as—shudder—something written by some caricature of an ivory-tower academic.

Verbs propel prose. Perhaps you have unwittingly allowed abstract nouns to usurp the place of verbs, which not only slows the pace of your writing, but also adds bulk and undermines concreteness, defeating your best efforts to be concise and vivid. Diagnosis? Nominalization.

A nominalization is a noun formed from another part of speech. Sometimes that part of speech is an adjective or adverb. Abstract becomes abstraction. Pompous becomes pomposity. Stultifying becomes stultification. Often that part of speech is a verb. Violate becomes violation. Announce becomes announcement. Conform becomes conformity.

Many nominalizations—as you can see—are perfectly fine and useful words. Overdose on these “buried verbs,” though, and your writing drags and you waste space. A sentence packed with nominalizations becomes less direct and more difficult to understand. Often, nominalizations hide the actor and obscure the action. This makes it harder to engage your reader. Action interests readers. Readers want to know who did what to whom. And actors provoke more response from a reader than do disengaged results. Scholar and teacher Helen Sword calls nominalizations “zombie nouns” because they “cannibalize active verbs,” substitute abstractions for actors, and suck the life—and brains—right out of your prose.¹

Let's take a look at a few examples:

Clunky: The blood **collection** took place at the scene. (eight words)

Better: The police **collected** blood at the scene. (seven words)

Clunky: An **agreement** was reached on the **application** of the formula for the **calculation** of damages. (15 words)

Better: The parties **agreed** to **apply** the formula to **calculate** damages. (10 words)

Here's one from Bryan Garner that shows just how much bulk nominalizations can add:

Clunky: The court placed principal **reliance** on its finding that the **existence** of official signs as well as state and national flags on the building created the **appearance** of a government stamp of **endorsement** on discriminatory conduct. (36 words)

Better: The court principally **relied** on its findings that the signs and state and national flags hung from the building made it **appear** that the government **endorsed** discriminatory conduct. (28 words)²


As you can see, identifying nominalizations and transform-

ing them back into the verbs they were meant to be can revitalize a sentence and buy you space—which any attorney trying to meet a page- or word-count knows can be a most scarce and valuable commodity.

How, then, do you find and eliminate those pesky nominalizations? One trick is to scan your writing for words ending in -ion, -ity, -ent or -ive. Rewrite those sentences to uncover the buried verbs: “took into consideration” becomes “considered,” “is in conformity” becomes “conforms,” “effects the establishment of” becomes “establishes,” and “is violative of” becomes “violates.”

You also can approach the problem by preferring strong verbs wherever possible. Avoid weak verbs like “to be,” “to have,” and “to make.” Instead, marshal dynamic ones packed with meaning: “thwart,” “heed,” “pigeonhole,” “sunder.” Often a single good verb conveys the meaning of a weaker verb plus several adjectives or adverbs and a nominalization or two.

Those who wish to obfuscate love nominalizations. The worst academic writing is full of them, and I'm sure we all can identify impossibly impenetrable contracts, statutes or regulations that seem deliberately designed to confound. If you want your reader to doze, or if you want to disguise the actor or the meaning for some reason, employing a carefully chosen series of nominalizations may serve your ends.

Most of us, however, wish to be understood. Some even dare to be interesting. A nominalization works here and there—what would lawyers do without nouns like “complaint,” “agreement” and “violation,” after all—but replacing most nominalizations with strong verbs will enliven your writing and revive your readers. 

endnotes

1. Helen Sword, Opinionator Blog, *Zombie Nouns*, N.Y. TIMES, July 23, 2012, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns/?_r=0
2. BRYAN GARNER, *THE WINNING BRIEF* 193 (2004).



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