

Nominalizations

A nominalization is a verb or adjective that has been turned into a noun. The word itself exemplifies the thing; nominalizing the verb *nominalize* produces the noun *nominalization*. Here are some other examples:

Verb/adjective		Nominalization
expand	→	expansion
justify	→	justification
imperceptible	→	imperceptibility
fail	→	failure
possible	→	possibility
participate	→	participation
liminal	→	liminality
consider	→	consideration
fly	→	flying
cease	→	cessation

Too many nominalizations can weigh down a sentence so heavily that it suffocates its own meaning—and its readers! But not all nominalizations are bad:

- Nominalizations that refer to previous sentences are often helpful. “These **possibilities** arise when . . .”
- So are those that replace a verb by combining both the verb and its object. Rather than “I’d like to know what he *intends*,” it’s simpler just to say “I’d like to know his **intention**.”
- And some nominalizations represent the clearest way to identify abstract ideas or concepts: “**Revolution**,” “**procedure**,” “**election**,” “**discovery**.”

That said, it’s best to avoid nominalizations as often as possible. Why? Because nominalizations obscure both the action and the subject of a sentence; in fact, they often appear hand-in-hand with the passive voice or with bland, lifeless verbs. Consider the following example from a social-sciences book on education:

“*[P]eripherality* is also a *positive* term, whose most salient conceptual antonyms are *unrelatedness* or *irrelevance* to ongoing activity. The partial **participation** of newcomers is by no means ‘disconnected’ from the practice of interest. Furthermore, **it** is also a dynamic concept. In this sense, **peripherality**, when it is enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement. The **ambiguity** inherent in peripheral participation must then be connected to issues of legitimacy, of the social organization of and control over resource, if it is to gain its full analytical potential.”

Yuck! This passage contains handfuls of nominalizations. But the reason the prose feels so oppressive is because every sentence makes a nominalization into the grammatical subject, and pairs it with a lame verb (“is [x 3] . . . suggests . . . must be”). What is actually *happening* here? And *who* is doing it? Hard to say. The passage so obscures its own story and characters that it’s impossible to comprehend.

Nominalizations are the worst characteristic of obscurant and jargon-laden writing in academia, business, and law. If people, action, and stories are important to the topic you’re writing about, then you should work to avoid nominalizing them out of your prose.

Practice exercises

A few exercises for you to practice freeing sentences from bad nominalizations (and spotting the good ones):

1. Our discussion concerned what she requested.
2. Finally there was a justification for why the student was absent.
3. Government destabilization is often the result of fiscal crisis.
4. A survey was taken to make a measurement of consumer satisfaction in order to advance recommendations about its improvement.
5. The removal of career-advancement obstacles for working mothers would be a key step toward the achievement of gender equality. Its importance is paramount until the pay gap is closed.

Note that eliminating the bad nominalizations makes these sentences more concise, requires you to restructure them to reflect clearer logic, and forces you to concretely identify the *doers* behind the actions these sentences describe.

A parting note. Two maxims will help you to spot, eliminate, and ultimately avoid nominalization altogether: **write with active verbs, and omit needless words.**

Sources and Further Reading/Practice:

Helen Sword, “Zombie Nouns,” *New York Times* Opinionator blog (23 August 2012)

Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb, *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*, 4th. ed. (Boston: Longman, 2012), esp. pp. 8-19.