
Guest Column: A Word, Please: nominalizations

June 24, 2021



Before 2006, I never gave much thought to nominalizations — noun forms like “beauty” and “the scheduling” that at heart are really adjectives like “beautiful” or verbs like “to schedule.” I was familiar with the concept, but I didn’t understand how much it could improve writing.

That changed when I came across “The Curious Case of the Misplaced Modifier” by Bonnie Trenga — a brilliant little book that portrays common writing mistakes as mysteries to be investigated detective-style. Chapter 2, “The Illuminating Investigation Into the Nasty Nominalization,” changed me.

The chapter begins with a short detective story packed with badly written sentences: “Astonishment by Miss Crufflepuff had occurred upon the realization that a thief had absconded with her TV and toaster. However, the perpetrator’s leaving of the heirloom silverware caused much head scratching.

If you came across writing this bad in the wild you might not notice how bad it is. Instead, you’d lose focus, lose interest and put the book down. Even if you did pause to appreciate how exquisitely bad this writing is, you probably couldn’t put your finger on why.

As Trenga illustrates so clearly, nominalizations are the problem. “Astonishment” is a noun form of the adjective “astonished.” “Realization” is the noun form of the verb “realize.” “The leaving of the heirloom silverware” makes a noun out of “leaving.” And the crowning glory, “caused much head scratching” uses a noun “scratching” instead of the verb “scratch.”

Nominalizations are perfectly grammatical. Lots of adjectives and verbs have noun forms. I run: verb. I wear running shoes: adjective. Running is good exercise: noun.

But unlike verbs and adjectives, a nominalization can sometimes make a sentence terrible. Or should I say, they can imbue a sentence with terribleness.

There are several reasons.

First, nouns trying to do the work of verbs or adjectives are static and abstract — lifeless objects devoid of action or texture. They're poor substitutes for dynamic verbs and descriptive adjectives. The idea of “walking” is less relatable than “Joe walked,” with an actual person doing an actual thing.

Second, sentences with nominalizations often leave out subjects of action. As Trenga notes, in “The screeching unnerved the rookie,” you don't know who's screeching.

Third, nominalizations often require awkward writing just to make sense. In “Astonishment by Miss Crufflepuff had occurred upon the realization,” you need a word like “by” or “of” just to know who is astonished. Plus, you end up with the action-deprived verb “had occurred” and the always-awkward “upon.” The preposition “of” is the nominalization's biggest accomplice. The screeching of the owl. The writing of the will. The walking of the dog.

Trenga uses simple examples to show how to rewrite sentences to get rid of nominalizations.

“The last step was the collection of the victim's dust bunnies” can be recast as “The forensics team collected the victim's dust bunnies.”

“Happiness was evident after the clown was arrested” can be rewritten as “The detective was happy after she arrested the clown.”

Since I read Trenga's book, I see nominalizations everywhere. And I know how to fix them. On the day I wrote this column, I edited an article with a sentence like “The addition of the new headquarters paved the way for the creation of jobs.” Armed with an understanding of nominalizations, I could see multiple alternatives including, “ABC's new headquarters opened in 2014, adding 200 jobs in the community.”

Another example from my editing work: “We elevate the status of our communities through the provision of high-quality, affordable healthcare services.” When I was done, it said, “We elevate our communities by providing high-quality, affordable healthcare services.”

Of course, nominalizations exist for a reason. “The running of the bulls” is a good example of a deliberate nominalization that requires no improvement. And the word “nominalization” is itself a nominalization.

When you spot a nominalization, try rewriting the sentence. In some cases, you'll see the sentence is best left as is. But more often than not, the writing will be better when you're done.

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