

WRITING GUIDE | Nominalizations: “Zombie nouns”

Helen Sword, writing for the *New York Times* column “Draft”:^{*}

“Nouns formed from other parts of speech are called nominalizations. Academics love them; so do lawyers, bureaucrats and business writers. I call them “zombie nouns” because they cannibalize active verbs, suck the lifeblood from adjectives and substitute abstract entities for human beings.”

Do you know a zombie noun when you see one? (They’re the ones on the right.)

intelligent	intelligence
perceive	perception
expel	expulsion
reflect	reflection
illustrate	illustration
fail	failure
react	reaction
announce	announcement
commence	commencement
expand	expansion
experiment	experimentation
synthesize	synthesis
difficult	difficulty
move	movement
write	writing
useful	usefulness
egregious	egregiousness

Often, editors and handbooks will give the impression that nominalizations are “bad,” at best, and, at worst, incorrect. In fact, nominalizations can be very helpful—why else would the language be full of them? They allow us to express complicated ideas and introduce another element of flexibility into English syntax.

However, nominalizations can suck the life out of writing, and a good writer should always edit to remove or reduce unnecessary (ineffective) nominalizations.

What’s the problem with nominalizations?

- overuse can make writing abstract
- often require additional words be added to maintain the syntax
- likely to cast a verb into the passive form when the active would be better
- if the nominalization is of a verb, the “action” of the sentence is obscured, making it harder for readers to understand

^{*} “Nominalizations are Zombie Nouns,” July 23, 2012.

Examples (the ~~zombies~~ nominalizations are in bold)

There was committee **agreement** that **failure** to complete the task by year's end could lead to **rejection** of the report.

Editing suggestion:

The committee agreed that if it failed to complete the task by year's end, the report might be rejected.

Ecosystem **destabilization** can be the consequence of **invasion**.

Editing suggestion:

Invasion can destabilize an ecosystem.

A **decision** was made by the members to conduct an **organization** of the projects that exhibited effectiveness.

Editing suggestion:

The members decided to organize the effective projects.

A **conclusion** was reached that pH determined the rate.

Editing suggestions:

We concluded that pH determined the rate.

The researchers concluded that pH determined the rate.

The analysis process that was the **requirement** of the **experimentation** protocol is an **indication** of researchers' lack of ability in data synthesis.

Editing suggestion:

The protocol for the experiment required an analysis process, which indicates that the researchers lacked the ability to synthesize data.

Many engineering personnel have **made comments** regarding a lack of **knowledge** about what new information is available in the library as literature is filed into the library without any sort of **notification**.

Editing suggestion:

Many engineering personnel have commented that they don't know what new information is available in the library, as they are not notified when literature is filed.