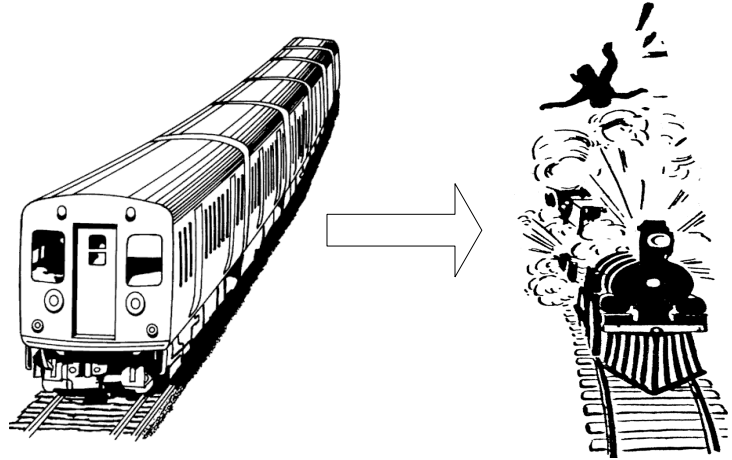


Blow Up Nominalizations and Noun Trains



BACKGROUND |

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,

As those move easiest who have learned to dance.

—Alexander Pope,
An Essay on Criticism

Rescue the verb

On the Web, people feel impatient with any text that seems ambiguous or hard to understand. Turning verbs like *suggest* and *define* into nouns like *suggestion* and *definition* may seem innocuous, but if you keep transforming actions into things, your prose gets clotted. Readers struggle to figure out who does what, because the prose seems full of objects with only a few fuzzy actions. Compare:

Our general suggestion is that your definition of the goal should probably have greater precision.

We suggest that you define the goal more precisely.

Which sentence can you understand more quickly? The second one, probably. It tells you who is talking and makes clear what they want you to do. It's more precise.

When you turn a verb into a noun, you are nominalizing—a horrible thing to do. An obvious indication that you have just

nominalized a verb is that the word gets longer, often by adding a Latinate suffix like *tion*, *ization*, or worse. But nominalizations occur whenever you make a verb do a noun’s work—even when it’s the same word. Compare:

Upon the receipt of our product, please conduct a review of the contents of the box.

When you receive our product, please review the contents of the box.

Don’t abuse a verb by making it act like a noun.

- When the nominalization trails after a nondescript verb, as in “may register improvement,” get rid of the verb and turn the nominalization into the main verb (“may improve”).
- When the nominalization follows a phrase such as “There is...” lop off that phrase, change the nominalization into a verb, and discover a new subject. For instance, “There is a development from our European office” might be changed into “Our European office has developed....”

Untie the noun knot

To compress a bunch of concepts into a single phrase, professionals often chain together a series of nouns, such as *office design management worksheet user manual*. Unfortunately, ordinary folks have trouble teasing apart the sequence, figuring out which noun goes with which other one, and what the whole shebang means.

They’re often another form of jargon, a shorthanding of longer concepts. But clarity demands that the editor unpack the noun string. (Bush and Campbell, 1995)

Noun strings are often ambiguous because people can consider several nouns as a unit, modifying something else, but then reconsider and see several other nouns as a complete descriptive phrase, getting an entirely different viewpoint. For instance, a reader might consider these interpretations:

- The manual for people who use the worksheet that lets them manage the design of their office.
- The office copy of the manual explaining how to design the management of worksheet users.
- The manual for worksheet users who focus on design management in offices.

Of course, without knowing more, the reader could only guess which meaning was intended. This kind of push-me-pull-you process drives people right off your site.

EXAMPLES

Before

We're sorry, but the product specification of the selected hardcopy output device lacks the requested status indicator liquid crystal displays, as well as the supply feed extension mechanism.

After

We're sorry, but the selected printer lacks two things you asked for: the LCD display and an extra-large paper tray.

Before

There is a need for annual testing of both untreated water and treated water for a determination of contaminant levels.

After

Every year we should test both treated and untreated water to determine the level of contaminants.

Before

The system model security software made an investigation into the clock set violation breach.

After

The security software investigated the attempt to reset the system clock.

Before

The intention of the site development project team is to meet the beta deadline, even if that means the excision of some features.

After

Our project team intends to meet the beta deadline, even if we have to drop some features.

Before

Then there was a review of the file format conversion module.

After

We then reviewed the module that converts our files to other formats.

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

Noun strings are no fun. Neither are those other thingamajigs.

TO LEARN

Obscure and ambiguous. Definitely a no-no.

TO ACT

Follow the guideline to make sure people know what to do.

TO BE AWARE

Self-defeating to use.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

Use nominalizations to be one-up on the poor bastards. Noun trains just baffle anyone who doesn't already understand you completely.

See: Bush & Campbell (1995), Horton (1990), Price & Korman (1993), Tarutz (1992), Waite (1982), Williams (1990).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
(New Riders).

Copyright 2002 by Jonathan and Lisa Price

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the authors.

theprices@theprices.com

The Prices
918 La Senda Lane, NW
Albuquerque, NM 87107

No patent liability is assumed with respect to the use of the information contained herein.

Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and authors assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Nor is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of the information contained herein.

ISBN 0-7357-1151-8

Library of Congress Catalog Card: 2001089176