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Opinionator

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Zombie Nouns

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Draft is a series about the art and craft of writing.

Take an adjective (*implacable*) or a verb (*calibrate*) or even another noun (*crony*) and add a suffix like *ity*, *tion* or *ism*. You've created a new noun: *implacability*, *calibration*, *cronyism*. Sounds impressive, right?

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:

The *proliferation of nominalizations* in a discursive *formation* may be an *indication* of a *tendency* toward *pomposity* and *abstraction*.

The sentence above contains no fewer than seven nominalizations, each formed from a verb or an adjective. Yet it fails to tell us *who* is doing *what*. When we eliminate or reanimate most of the zombie nouns (*tendency* becomes *tend*, *abstraction* becomes *abstract*) and add a human subject and some active verbs, the sentence springs back to life:

Writers who overload their sentences with nominalizations tend to sound pompous and abstract.

Only one zombie noun – the key word *nominalizations* – has been allowed to remain standing.

At their best, nominalizations help us express complex ideas: *perception*, *intelligence*, *epistemology*. At their worst, they impede clear communication. I have seen academic colleagues become so enchanted by zombie nouns like *heteronormativity* and *interpellation* that they forget how ordinary people speak. Their students, in turn, absorb the dangerous message that people who use big words are smarter – or at least appear to be – than those who don't.

In fact, the more abstract your subject matter, the more your readers will appreciate stories, anecdotes, examples and other handholds to help them stay on track. In her book "Darwin's Plots," the literary historian Gillian Beer supplements abstract nouns like *evidence*, *relationships* and *beliefs* with

vivid verbs (*rebuff, overturn, exhilarate*) and concrete nouns that appeal to sensory experience (*earth, sun, eyes*):

Most major scientific theories rebuff common sense. They call on evidence beyond the reach of our senses and overturn the observable world. They disturb assumed relationships and shift what has been substantial into metaphor. The earth now only seems immovable. Such major theories tax, affront, and exhilarate those who first encounter them, although in fifty years or so they will be taken for granted, part of the apparently common-sense set of beliefs which instructs us that the earth revolves around the sun whatever our eyes may suggest.

Her subject matter – scientific theories – could hardly be more cerebral, yet her language remains firmly anchored in the physical world.

Contrast Beer's vigorous prose with the following passage from a social sciences book:

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 resources, if it is to gain its full analytical potential.

Why does reading this paragraph feel like trudging through deep mud? The secret lies at its grammatical core: *Participation is. . . It is. . . Peripherality suggests. . . Ambiguity must be connected.* Every single sentence has a zombie noun or a pronoun as its subject, coupled with an uninspiring verb. Who are the people? Where is the action? What story is being told?

To get a feeling for how zombie nouns work, release a few of them into a sentence and watch them sap all of its life. George Orwell played this game in his essay “**Politics and the English Language**,” contrasting a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes with his own satirical translation:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here it is in modern English:

Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

The Bible passage speaks to our senses and emotions with concrete nouns (*sun, bread*), descriptions of people (*the swift, the wise, men of understanding, men of skill*) and punchy abstract nouns (*race, battle, riches, time, chance*). Orwell's “modern English” version, by contrast, is teeming with nominalizations (*considerations, conclusion, activities, tendency, capacity, unpredictable*) and other

vague abstractions (*phenomena, success, failure, element*). The zombies have taken over, and the humans have fled the village.

Zombie nouns do their worst damage when they gather in jargon-generating packs and infect every noun, verb and adjective in sight: *globe* becomes *global* becomes *globalize* becomes *globalization*. The grandfather of all nominalizations, *antidisestablishmentarianism*, potentially contains at least two verbs, three adjectives and six other nouns.

A paragraph heavily populated by nominalizations will send your readers straight to sleep. Wake them up with vigorous, verb-driven sentences that are concrete, clearly structured and blissfully zombie-free.

For an operationalized assessment of your own propensity for nominalization dependence (translation: to diagnose your own zombie habits), try pasting a few samples of your prose into the **Writer's Diet test**. A score of "flabby" or "heart attack" in the noun category indicates that 5 percent or more of your words are nominalizations.

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