Good Writing Practice

Syntactic structure

Circumlocution: Nominalisation + perfunctory verb

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Introduction

Nominalisation is the transformation of a precise verb into another sentence constituent, usually a noun (nominalisation), sometimes an adjective (adjectivalisation). This syntactic transformation elicits the grammatical necessity to add an imprecise (i.e., perfunctory) verb (see Box).

Collectively the nominalised and the perfunctory verb add to other types of syntactic circumlocution such as dependent clauses and absolute phrases. It could be argued that usage of a perfunctory verb is a semantic distraction, characterised by imprecision and nonprofessional tone. However, the syntactic taxonomy provides insight into the underlying cause of the distraction and, in turn, its revision.

On the positive side, nominalisation results from thematic focus; that is, placement into the subject position the conceptual topic of a sentence rather than agents responsible for the action. The first sentence in this article is an example: *Nominalisation is the transformation of a precise verb into another sentence constituent.* Such nominalisation is often accompanied by the verb *to be*. Another verb characteristic is usage of the passive voice as in *The taxonomy as nonprofessional tone is justified by the lack of verb precision.* Overall, nominalisation contributes to an academic formal descriptive style. However, on the negative side, nominalisation results in burying a precise action verb and replacing it with an actionless linking verb or unnecessary perfunctory verb.

The examples in this article are organised according to sections of a journal article (Experimental and Contextual), their conceptual components, and the sentence constituent into which the precise verb is nominalised. In addition, an example of verb adjectivalisation is presented.

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Experimental sections

Part 1 – Materials and Methods section: Method

Example: Nominalised sentence subject
The _isolation_ of the tertiary component _was accomplished_ by the following:

Revision (de-nominalisation)
The tertiary component was **isolated** by the following:

Notes

The most typical nominalisation involves a precise verb that is transformed into a noun subject. In the example, the specific verb *isolated* is nominalised into the sentence subject *isolation*, grammatically necessitating the usage of the perfunctory verb *accomplished*. In addition to imprecision, over-usage of perfunctory verbs results in synonymous verbs (synonymy) each with slightly different connotations, especially in the Materials and Methods section where the succession of methods necessitates repetition of action verbs.

In the revision, de-nominalisation results in (1) precision: the perfunctory verb *accomplished* is replaced by **isolated** and (2) concision: the perfunctory verb and the preposition *of* are deleted, so that the revision consists of three fewer words.

However, when the nominalised subject is thematically focused on the conventional usage in a discipline, its usage along with a perfunctory verb (e.g. *perform*) may be preferred. For example, *In situ hybridisation was performed*, rather than *cells were in situ hybridised*.

Part 2 – Results section: Data-based observation

Example: Nominalised direct object
Compound A <u>caused</u> a significant <u>inhibition</u> of leukotriene synthesis.

Revision (de-nominalisation)
*Compound A significantly **inhibited** leukotriene synthesis.*

Notes

Inhibited is clear and direct language whereas *caused a significant inhibition* is indirect. In the example, the potential precise verb *inhibited* is nominalised into *inhibition* grammatically necessitating the usage of the perfunctory verb *caused*. *Caused* may not at first seem perfunctory, but it is compared to *inhibited*. In addition, the three-word difference between the example and revision characterises the example as a circumlocution.

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: Research hypothesis

Example: Nominalised gerund object in a prepositional phrase
The erythrocyte <u>may function</u> by <u>supplying</u> developing tissues with linolenic acid.

Revision (de-nominalisation)
*The erythrocyte may **supply** developing tissues with linolenic acid.*

Notes

In the example, the potential precise verb *supply* occurs as the gerund object of the preposition *by*, thereby necessitating usage of the perfunctory verb *function*. De-nominalisation (*by supplying* → *supply*) eliminates the perfunctory verb *function* and the preposition *by*, also reducing the word count from 11 to 9.

Part 2 – Discussion section: Limitation

Example: Adjectivalised past participle
Baseline counts <u>could contribute to altered</u> haematocrit.

Revision (de-adjectivalisation)
*Baseline counts could **alter** haematocrit.*

Notes

Transformation of a verb into an adjective (or adjectival) necessitates the use of a perfunctory verb. In the example, the transformation of the verb *alter* into the adjectival participle *altered* necessitates the addition of the perfunctory (phrasal) verb *contribute to,* so that the sentence is grammatical. A phrasal verb consists of a verb and a preposition-like word, such as *contribute to*.

Another characteristic of a phrasal verb is that the preposition-like word *to* cannot be shifted to a position other than contiguous to the verb. In the Revision, de-adjectivalisation results in the deletion of *contribute to*.

Summary

Nominalisation + perfunctory verb, particularly subject and direct object positions, is a common distraction in the experimental sections (Materials and Methods, Results) of journal articles. Such nominalisation is less obvious in the conceptual sections (Introduction, Discussion). Although the circumlocution is a dissonance, the imprecision of a perfunctory verb is a nonprofessional tone. For all of the examples in this article, de-nominalisation (or de-adjectivalisation) eliminates the perfunctory verb, reinforcing the principle that the nomenclature of a syntactic distraction (e.g. nominalisation + perfunctory verb circumlocution) is a cue to its revision.

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Common perfunctory verbs

Accomplished[1]	Given
Achieved	Implemented
Attained	Made
Conducted	Obtained
(Contribute to)[2]	Occurred
Demonstrated	Performed
Done	Produced
Effected	Realised
Employed	(Resulted in)[2]
Executed	Showed
Exhibited	Taken
Experienced	Used

1 The past participle instead of the verb stem (e.g. *accomplish*) is listed because the participle is the most frequent form in the passive voice (e.g. *something was accomplished*). Only transitive verbs can be expressed in the passive voice, whereas intransitive verbs cannot (e.g. you cannot say *"something was functioned"*).
2 Phrasal verb (see Adjectivalised Past Participle).