



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LAW WRITING CENTER

Avoid Nominalizations¹

Legal writers often overuse a grammatical construction known as nominalization – the creation of nouns from verbs and adjectives. As a law student, you probably read statutes and judicial opinions full of nominalizations. You may think you must imitate this style to sound formal or lawyerly. However, while technically correct, nominalizations make sentences difficult to understand because they remove critical information about the actor and do not communicate a scene that the reader can easily picture. Nominalization also drains your sentence of forcefulness by stripping the action from the verb and placing it in a static noun. Try converting your nominalizations back to verbs and adjectives. Your writing will become easier to understand and more persuasive.

1. How to Identify Nominalizations

Nominalization occurs when a writer converts a verb or adjective into a noun:

<i>The verb</i>	<i>can be turned into the noun</i>
determine	determination
apply	application
resolve	resolution
enforce	enforcement ²

Nominalizations trap action in static nouns and make sentences difficult to comprehend because they do not create a scene that the reader can easily visualize. Like truncated passives, nominalizations leave out important information about the actor:

POOR: *Recovery* is predicated upon *circumvention* of the current *interpretation* of the statute.

BETTER: Our client can *recover* if he *circumvents* the current interpretation of the statute.³

¹ By Cecelia Smith, Writing Specialist, 2025.

² VEDA R. CHARROW ET AL., CLEAR AND EFFECTIVE LEGAL WRITING 182 (5th ed. 2013).

³ *Id.* at 183.

The improved sentence releases the action from static nouns – *recovery* and *circumvention* - and expresses it in active verbs – *recover* and *circumvents*. The sentence names the actor so that the reader easily follows the standard subject-verb-object structure. While *interpretation* is another nominalization, it is appropriate because it cannot easily be replaced with a verb clause.⁴

2. Nominalizations Attract Inert Verbs and Extra Words

Nominalizations are derivative nouns that attract weak verbs. Derivative nouns require supporting verbs, like a verb of being or another inert verb:

POOR: The determination *was made* that the rule *had* no application to her situation.

BETTER: The court *determined* that the rule did not *apply* to her.⁵

Was made and *had* are weak verbs. Sentences become more forceful when the nominalizations are converted to active verbs - *determined* and *apply*.

Nominalizations also burden sentences with additional words including prepositions and articles:

POOR: Please *make a statement of* why you are raising *an objection to* the question.

BETTER: Please *state* why you *object* to the question.

The nominalization *statement* requires a supporting verb (*make*), an article (*a*), and a preposition (*of*). The nominalization *objection* requires a supporting verb (*raising*), an article (*an*), and a preposition (*to*). In the improved sentence, the base verb *state* can do all the work alone.⁶ Eliminate wordiness by using verbs rather than nominalizations.

3. Nominalizations as Adjectives

Some nominalizations are rooted in adjectives rather than verbs:

<i>The adjective</i>	<i>can be turned into the noun</i>
enforceable	enforceability
applicable	applicability
specific	specificity
important	importance ⁷

Notice how the adjectives have been nominalized in these sentences:

POOR: The *difficulty* of the assignment caused the students to struggle.

BETTER: The students struggled with the *difficult* assignment.

In the first sentence, the adjective is nominalized, and the subject of the sentence is unclear. In the second sentence, the reader knows the actor and can easily comprehend the scene created by

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Elizabeth Ruiz Frost, *How to Ruin Perfectly Good Verbs and Adjectives: Nominalizations*, 77 OR. ST. BAR BULL. 13 (2017), https://law.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2017_april.pdf.

⁶ RICHARD C. WYDICK & AMY E. SLOAN, *PLAIN ENGLISH FOR LAWYERS* 24 (6th ed. 2019).

⁷ CHARROW ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 182.

the sentence.⁸ Convert nominalizations to adjectives and add the actor to make your sentences easy to understand.

4. When to Use Nominalizations

Nominalizations are sometimes helpful when you want to focus on the noun and describe it in further detail. Nominalizations can be useful when they serve as the subject of the sentence and refer to the previous sentence.

GOOD: She decided to sue her employer after consulting with an attorney. Her decision was not surprising.⁹

When you intend to focus on the noun, nominalization is a useful tool. Nouns like "achievement" and "enjoyment" may require nominalization because they focus on a concept rather than an action.

In summary, you should concentrate on editing nominalizations for four reasons:

- You clarify and humanize the text by saying who does what to whom.
- You make your sentences more forceful when you use active verbs rather than nouns.
- You avoid verbs of being and other inert verbs by replacing them with active verbs.
- You often eliminate prepositions and articles in the process.

⁸ Frost, *supra* note 5, at 3.

⁹ Christopher Anzidei & Zachary Brez; updated by Kenton DeBouter, *Ten Rules of Grammar and Usage that You Should Know*, The Writing Center at Georgetown University Law Center (2023), <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/grammar.pdf>.