

College Writing #3 – Nouns that SPEAK

In College Writing #1 & #2 we worked on verbs. Verbs give your writing that punch it needs, but nouns give it VOICE. Nouns impart the poetry, the details, and the personality to the piece. In this article you will learn a few more simple rules [for nouns this time] that can help you improve your academic writing.

Naming

First rule: Choose the noun that best identifies the actor or item.

OK, that is simple. Or is it? Words carry connotations. Why else would we want or need a Thesaurus? Take a look at these synonyms:

- House
 - Residence
 - Dwelling
 - Abode
 - Domicile
 - Quarters
 - Cabin
 - Cottage
 - Mansion
 - ...many more

It absolutely matters which noun you choose. Use those subtle and not-so-subtle differences to increase the precision in your writing, as well as to enhance your personal style.

Nouns and Pronouns

When we were young, we all learned that “*a noun is a name of a person, place, or idea.*” Easy enough. But what happens so often in longer pieces is that one uses the noun once, then switches to ‘he’ or ‘it’ [a pronoun] for the next 5 paragraphs. NAME it several times [at least once in each paragraph] and remember that there are alternatives:

Senator John Jones – Senator Jones – Mr. Jones – Junior Senator from
Delaware

I am not saying pronouns are out – of course not. The salient point is that it is important that you strike a balance between the noun and the pronoun.



Occam's Razor Applies

"The simplest is likely the best"

I agree that a large vocabulary is a valuable thing for an academic writer, but be direct. No need for some over-flowery diction when there is a more direct and equally descriptive alternative.

Inflated: cognizant of

Simple: aware of, knows

Inflated: facilitate

Simple: help

Inflated: impact on

Simple: affect

Inflated: implement

Simple: start, create, carry out, begin

Inflated: subsequent to

Simple: after

Inflated: utilize

Simple: use

A Noun needs a MEANING

Some nouns are seriously overused to the point that we end up losing sight of their original meanings, perhaps even losing sight of any real meaning at all. Vague nouns sometimes lead to wordiness, especially when used in prepositional phrases.

- factor
- aspect
- area
- situation
- consideration
- degree
- case

Vague: Consumer demand is rising *in the area of* services.

Precise: Consumers are demanding more services.

Vague: Strong reading skills are *an important factor* in students' success in college.

Precise: Students' success in college depends on their reading skills.

Vague: Photography took on new *aspects* during the Civil War.



Precise: The Civil War saw the advent of graphic battlefield photography.

Jargon-y Noun Chains

Of course professions [and government] use specialized jargon, but if you are writing not for 'insiders' but rather for a wider audience, it can end up meaningless. One particularly difficult kind of jargon is that in which several nouns come in a chain:

Noun string: MHS has a *hospital employee relations improvement program*.
Correction: MHS has a program to improve relations among employees.

Noun string: NASA continues to work on the *International Space Station astronaut living-quarters module development project*.
Correction: NASA is still developing the module that will provide living quarters for the astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

Now to wrap up this lesson – your nouns are your voice. Choose among synonyms for their shades of description. Don't let pronouns dilute your focus too much. Select nouns with solid, precise meanings that all of your audience will understand.

A single editing pass through your article with an eye to the nouns will go far to improve your academic writing.

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