Academic Writing

3. Abstract concepts and abstract writing

Academic writing is often described as complex and abstract. This is partly due to the subject matter of the writing; however, it is also due to the language itself. For example, the nominal groups can be long and complex.[1] Furthermore, these nominal groups often contain abstract nouns which are typically formed by turning a verb such as *to decide* into a 'thing', *the decision*. This process of turning an event or action into a thing is referred to as **nominalisation**.

Consider these examples:

more spoken language	more written language
children *like* Sega games	the *popularity* of Sega games
people *objected* to the building	the building *objections*

In our examples, the spoken versions are about people and concrete things, whereas in our written versions the 'thing' is an abstraction and the people (*people, children*) are absent. Once an action has been turned into a thing (*the popularity of Sega games*), we can talk about this thing by relating it to something else. For example:

> *The popularity of virtual pets and the Sega games amongst Japanese children is often seen as a consequence of the lack of personal space available to Japanese people.*

The *popularity* of the Sega games is discussed in terms of causes (*as a consequence*), but we could also have written about *the effects* of the popularity, the attributes etc.[2]

In the next excerpt from a history essay there are many nominalisations. The excerpt forms the conclusion to an essay on why the British stopped sending convicts to New South Wales. When you read the excerpt, you'll notice that the focus is not on who did the actions, or who made the decision, rather the focus is on the **reasons** for the decision. How is this achieved? It is achieved partly through the process of nominalisation, as many actions have been condensed into nominal groups. For example, the clause *The colonials became more and more opposed to transportation* is realised as one nominal group: *growing opposition to transportation.* The process *opposed* has been nominalised to form *opposition*, and the human participants (the colonials) are absent.

Identifying nominalisations is partly a process of 'unpacking' a nominal group. One way of identifying nominalisations is to try and unpack the nominal groups so that it becomes a verb, or a process. For example, *the suspension of transportation* contains two nominalisations: *suspension* and *transportation*. A more spoken version of this nominal group would be something like *the British suspended transportation*, or *the British stopped transporting convicts*.

The following excerpt is the conclusion of a history essay. The nominal groups are in italics. Underline any nominalisations in these nominal groups then write the verb form of the noun below it. The first one has been done for you.

NOTE: in this task, the focus is only on identifying verbs which appear in nominal groups as nominalisations.

The <u>suspension</u> of transportation to New South Wales in 1840 was due to
  suspended

multiple factors that occurred throughout the 1830s. The combination of growing

opposition in both the New South Wales colony and in Britain created *a gradual*

process by which *transportation* was abolished. *Penal reform, pressure from*

Wakefieldian supporters, and colonial agitation concerning the moral degradation of

society by convicts, all combined to end *transportation* in *1840.* There was no *single*

defining moment or instance which instigated the end of transportation but rather

incremental shifts of ideology and beliefs concerning the existing state of the penal

colony of New South Wales.

To check your answers, see the KEY at the end of this unit.

Nominalisations and 'readability'

In the Sega games example, you saw how the process of nominalisation resulted in two clauses becoming one. You also saw how the people doing the actions were left out. These factors, as well as the resulting 'packing in' of information into the nominal group, result in writing which can be difficult to read. Nominalisations change the distribution of information in the clause: human actors (the people doing the actions) tend to get left out; more information is compressed into the nominal group and the number of clauses is reduced. As a result, highly nominalised writing can be difficult to read because a lot of information has been compressed into the nominal group. However, nominalisation is a significant feature of academic writing contributing greatly to its impersonal tone, abstraction and complexity. So learning how to use nominalisations in your own writing is an important part of becoming a sophisticated writer at university.

The first task required you to identify nominalisations, the purpose of which was to make you aware of the extent of nominalisations in academic writing. The next task requires you to remove the nominalisations from the history synopsis. The process of removing the nominalisations will make the text less abstract and more concrete. It will also change what information we include in the clause. While doing this next task, consider the level of sophistication of the writing without the nominalisations as well as how written or spoken the language sounds.

Complete the following sentences. Note: to remove the nominalisations you may need to introduce people to the sentence to do the action, for example:

> **nominalisation:** *The <u>suspension</u> of transportation*

> **nominalisation replaced by an action and someone doing the action:**
> *The <u>**British suspended**</u> transportation*

Introducing more verbs to the text may also mean that you have two clauses instead of one.

Example:

> *<u>Transportation</u> was not abandoned for years later due to the <u>dependence</u> of the colony on convict labour.*

Note: one clause

> *The British didn't stop sending convicts for another couple of years because the colony depended on convict labour.*

Note: participants have been introduced, that is, **the British** and **the colony**. Also there are now two events (two clauses); **the British didn't stop sending**, and **the colony depended**

1 The <u>suspension of transportation</u> to New South Wales in 1840 was due to multiple factors that occurred throughout the 1830s.

   The British _____ to New South Wales in 1840 because of multiple factors that occurred throughout the 1830s.

2 The <u>combination of growing opposition</u> to transportation in both the New South Wales colony and in Britain created a gradual process by which transportation was abolished.

   In both New South Wales and Britain _____ _____to transportation, and so a gradual process was created by which it was abolished.

3 Penal reform, pressure from Wakefieldian supporters, and colonial agitation concerning the moral degradation of society by convicts all combined to end transportation in 1840.

   Transportation ended in 1840 because the British _____ penal laws, and Wakefield's supporters _____ the government. Also, transportation was stopped because the _____ against the moral degradation of society by convicts.

For suggested answers see the KEY at the end of this unit

Nominalising: how do you do it?: some guidelines

Example sentence:

Many modern artists employ computers in their work.

det.	adj	noun	verb	noun	prepositional phrase

1 Identify the main verb in the clause; 'employ'

2 Change the verb into the noun form; 'employ' ⟶ 'the employment'
If the noun form is not appropriate, choose a synonym that is; 'the employment'
⟶ 'the use'

3 This noun then becomes the **head noun** of the nominal group you are about to form;

'The use' whose use?

*'The **modern*** use of what?
***artists** use'*

'The modern artists use of computers where?
use of computers'

' *The modern artists use of computers **in their work**. …*
(completed nominal group)

From the above example you can see that a whole sentence/ clause can be changed into an abstract and specific nominal group which allows the writer to then say something significant about its content, rather than just describing the action. This process, however, removes the verb and therefore, a verb must be placed after the nominal group to complete the sentence.

Example:

> *The modern artists use of computers in their work **<u>enables</u>** their expanding creativity.*

Task 3.3 creating nominalisations5

Rewrite the following sentences by nominalising the italicised events. In most cases you will need to modify the structure of the clause by removing who or what does the action, and combining the sentences.

Example:

> **The British transported** convicts to New South Wales in the early 1800's. This provided a cheap and efficient source of labour for the developing colony.

> **The transportation of convicts** to New South Wales in the early 1800's provided a cheap and efficient source of labour for the developing colony.

1 Convicts were allocated to private citizens in New South Wales to work on private properties. *The convicts were rarely paid* for their labour.

Convicts were allocated to private citizens in New South Wales to work on private properties with little or no _____.

2 *Many colonists opposed transportation* because they believed that no penal colony would ever be allowed to become independent.

_____ by the colonists was based on the idea that no penal colony would ever be allowed to become independent.

3 *The convicts provided the colony* with a cheap source of labour, which allowed the colony to *grow and expand*.

_____to the colony as a cheap source of labour contributed to the _____ of the colony.

4 *Convicts were assigned* to private citizens. This was criticised and compared to slavery.

_____to private citizens was criticised and compared to slavery.

For suggested answers see the KEY at the end of this unit.

Making the relationship between your ideas clear

When you use nominalisations to condense information, you should make sure that the relationship between your ideas is clear. For example, we can link ideas in terms of cause/effect, comparison/contrast etc.

Look at the following two simple sentences. These can be collapsed to form one clause with the relationship between the ideas made more explicit to the reader.

Example:

> *Many modern artists **employ** computers in their work.*

> *These machines **enable** the artist to be more creative.*

Before connecting the two sentences, first consider what the relationship is between the two ideas. There are various relationships that we make between our ideas. These relationship include the following:

- comparison/contrast
- cause/effect
- addition of information
- drawing a conclusion

The relationship between the example sentences above is cause and effect;

> *Many modern artists **employ** computers in their work.* (effect)

> *These machines **enable** the artist to be more creative.* (cause)

In this case, because the verb of the second sentence 'enable' indicates the cause/effect relationship, the nominalised first sentence can be connected to the verb of the second;

The modern artists' use of computers enables <u>them to be more creative</u>.

their creativity (nominalisation)

Task 3.4 Making the link between nominalisations clear

Join the following sentences by nominalising the word in italics and including a suitable verb to make the relationship between the ideas clear.

Example:

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1 I think euthanasia is ***important***.
   It is important because it is ***concerned*** with human rights.
   The importance of euthanasia _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

2 Women are ***administered*** drugs to produce numerous eggs for fertilisation.
   These drugs can ***affect*** women bodies in the long run.
   The administration of drugs to women to produce numerous eggs for fertilisation
   can have _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

3 Humans ***use*** animals for medical research.
   Many drugs have been ***discovered***.
   The use of animals in medical research

   _____
   _____
   _____

4 The sows are continually ***impregnated***.
   They ***produce*** up to five litters every two years.
   The continual impregnation of sows

   _____
   _____
   _____

For suggested answers see the KEY at the end of this unit.

Key: Abstract concepts and abstract writing

3.1 Identifying nominalisations

The <u>suspension</u> of <u>transportation</u> to New South Wales in 1840 was due to multiple
    suspended   **transported**

factors that occurred throughout the 1830s. The <u>combination</u> of growing <u>opposition</u> in
                   combined   **opposed**

both the New South Wales colony and in Britain created a gradual <u>process</u> by which
                                     processed

<u>transportation</u> *was abolished. Penal <u>reform</u>, <u>pressure</u> from Wakefieldian <u>supporters</u>,*
transported   **reformed, pressured**   **supported**

and colonial <u>agitation</u> concerning the moral <u>degradation</u> of society by convicts, all
        agitated   **degraded**

combined to end <u>transportation</u> in 1840. There was no *single defining moment or*
            transported

instance which instigated the end of <u>transportation</u> but rather *incremental <u>shifts</u> of*
              transported   **shifted**

ideology and <u>beliefs</u> concerning the existing state of the penal colony of New South Wales.
    believed

3.2 Removing the nominalisations from the history text

Suggested answers (other variations are possible)

1 The British ***stopped sending convicts*** to New South Wales in 1840 because of multiple factors that occurred throughout the 1830s.

2 In both New South Wales and Britain ***people became more and more opposed*** to transportation, and so a gradual process was created by which it was abolished.

3 Transportation ended in 1840 because the British ***reformed*** penal laws, and Wakefield's supporters ***pressured*** the government. Also, transportation was stopped because ***the colony agitated*** (or *lobbied*) against the moral degradation of society by convicts.

3.3 Creating nominalisations

Suggested answers (other variations are possible)

1 Convicts were allocated to private citizens in New South Wales to work on private properties with little or no ***payment for their labour*** .

2 ***Opposition to transportation*** by the colonists was based on the idea that no penal colony would ever be allowed to become independent.

3 ***The provision of convicts*** to the colony as a cheap source of labour contributed to the ***growth and expansion*** of the colony.

4 ***The assignment of convicts*** to private citizens was criticised and compared to slavery.

3.4 Making the link between nominalisations clear

Suggested answers (other variations are possible)

1 The importance of euthanasia **is due to its concern with human rights**.

2 The administration of drugs to women to produce numerous eggs for fertilisation can have **an effect on women's bodies in the long run**.

3 The use of animals for medical research **has resulted in the discovery of many drugs**.

4 The continual impregnation of sows **can result in the production of up to five litters every two years**.

Endnotes

1. In this unit nouns and noun phrases are referred to as nominal groups. See unit 2, **Nominal groups: nouns and their structure**.

2. This explanation of nominalisation is adapted from 'Nominalisation' in *Academic Writing* (ibid).

3. Adapted from *Academic Writing* (ibid).

4. Adapted from *Academic Writing* (ibid).

5. Adapted from *Academic Writing* (ibid).

References

Oshima A, & Hogue A (1991) *Writing Academic English,* 2nd Edition, Addison Wesley, Mento Park, California.

Woodward-Kron R, Thomson E, & Meek, J (2000). *Academic Writing: a language based guide* (CD-ROM), University of Wollongong.