

Helpful Hints for Technical Writing

Avoid Subjects Derived from Verbs

Nouns derived from verbs can be useful. But literature becomes sluggish, hard to read, and wordy when such nouns are used as subjects of sentences combined with drab verbs such as *occur*, *take place*, and *result*. The following examples from the scientific literature show how changing forceful verbs to nouns and using them as subjects required 20 to 200% extra words.



- As written (5 words): A reduction in yield occurred.
Better (3 words): Yield was reduced.
- As written (6 words): Damage to conifers took place when...
Better (4 words): Conifers were damaged when...
- As written (8 words): Germination of the seeds can occur at 17 C.
Better (6 words): The seeds can germinate at 17 C.
- As written (6 words): No development of the seedlings occurred.
Better (4 words): Seedlings did not develop.
- As written (8 words): Stimulation of emergence occurred following application of azide.
Better (3 words): Azide stimulated emergence.
- As written (6 words): Nozzle plugging resulted from suspended sediment.
Better (5 words): Suspended sediment plugged the nozzles.
- As written (6 words): An improvement in penetration took place.
Better (2 words): Penetration improved.

In the last issue, converting verbs to nouns for use as direct objects of drab verbs was considered. When such sentences are changed from the active voice to the passive voice, these verb-derived nouns become subjects and are found combined with various drab verbs. The following examples from the scientific literature show sentences in the passive voice with verb-derived nouns as subjects and how they can be improved.

- As written (7 words): An increase in alkaloid content was obtained.
Better (3 words): Alkaloid content increased.
- As written (6 words): An acceleration of output was realized.
Better (3 words): Output was accelerated.
- As written (6 words): An integration of methods was achieved.
Better (3 words): Methods were integrated.
- As written (7 words): A reduction in water stress was obtained.
Better (4 words): Water stress was reduced.

Like most problem words, *occur* can be useful. Used properly, it can tell when or where phenomena happen, for example:

- Many tornadoes occur in Kansas.
The accident occurred at 9 pm.

In the scientific literature, *occur* is most often found as the verb for a subject noun derived from a verb of action. Correcting such use nearly always improves the manuscript.

Remember: If you want your writing to have force,
Avoid the verb *occur*;
It says very little, clutters the page,
And clarity does blur.

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