

Helpful Hints for Technical Writing

Avoid Direct Objects Derived from Verbs



Verbs are powerful words that express action clearly and concisely. Some writers change forceful verbs to nouns, and then complete their sentences with drab, weak, and unexpressive verbs. The result is literature that is sluggish, hard to read, and wordy. The following examples from the scientific literature demonstrate how changing forceful verbs to nouns and using them as direct objects of drab verbs required 60 to 75% more words than was necessary.

As written (7 words):	Herbicides produced a reduction in dry weight.
Better (4 words):	Herbicides reduced dry weight.
As written (8 words):	Weed competition caused a suppression in corn yield.
Better (5 words):	Weed competition reduced corn yield.
As written (5 words):	EPTC gave control of foxtail.
Better (3 words):	EPTC controlled foxtail.
As written (7 words):	Timely cultivation achieved the eradication of quackgrass.
Better (4 words):	Timely cultivation eradicated quackgrass.
As written (8 words):	Two persons performed the evaluation of the plots.
Better (5 words):	Two persons evaluated the plots.

The nouns **reduction**, **suppression**, **control**, **eradication**, and **evaluation** were derived from the verbs **reduce**, **suppress**, **control**, **eradicate**, and **evaluate**. Wherever such a noun is the direct object of a drab verb like **produce**, **cause**, **give**, **achieve**, or **perform**, changing the noun back to a verb and eliminating the drab verb can strengthen and shorten the sentence.

Watch for verbs converted to nouns by adding *ion*, *th*, *ment*, etc., such as **eradicate-eradication**; **eliminate-elimination**; **grow-growth**; **develop-development**; **suppress-suppression**. Other verbs such as **control**, **increase**, **decrease**, **return**, and **yield** can become nouns without any change.

Nouns made from verbs are not always troublesome. Whenever you want to write about the action of the verb, sentences like the following are appropriate:

The **reduction** in weed number was only part of the total response.
Weed **control** is a rewarding activity.
Complete **eradication** required 10 yr of treatment.
His **evaluation** was scheduled for Tuesday.

Examples of drab verbs are: **accomplish**, **achieve**, **afford**, **bring**, **cause**, **create**, **deliver**, **do**, **exhibit**, **furnish**, **give**, **impart**, **make**, **obtain**, **offer**, **perform**, **present**, **produce**, **provide**, **realize**, **render**, **show**, **take**, and **yield**. Such verbs are drab when the direct object is the action of another verb. In contrast, they are expressive when the direct object is a tangible, concrete thing, as in the following sentences:

Hay fever **causes** discomfort. The factory **produces** tractors.
John **gave** Mary some roses. The chairman **presented** the award to the winner.
The soldier **achieved** the rank of major. The actor **performed** his role well.

If writers will learn to identify the drab-verb/verb-made-from-noun problem, they can eliminate it from their publications. Someday word processors will have programs that identify drab-verb and noun-from-verb combinations. With such help, it will be easy to reduce word number, strengthen the composition, and improve readability. In the meantime, catch these troublesome combinations in your own manuscripts and when you edit the manuscripts of your colleagues.

Remember: Strong verbs give life to the written word.
Take care how your verbs you choose;
If forceful verbs are changed to nouns,
Then drab verbs you must use.

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