



Academic writing

Abstraction



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Academic writing is often described as complex and abstract. This is due largely to the way topics are represented, often using long and complex noun groups. These “nominal groups” may contain abstract nouns, formed by turning an action verb (eg ‘*decide*’) into a ‘thing’ (eg ‘*decision*’). Representing activity as a thing is called **nominalisation**, and is very common in academic writing. Consider these examples:

spoken	written
children <i>like</i> Sega games	the <i>popularity</i> of Sega games
people <i>objected</i> to the building	<i>objections</i> to the building

In speaking, we typically talk about people and things that we can see or touch, whereas in academic writing, we typically focus on ‘things’ that are not easily observable, and people (*people, children*) are invisible. An abstract idea, or abstraction, is something that exists in discourse and not in any tangible sense in the real world. The advantage of turning observable action into an abstract kind of thing (*the popularity of Sega games*) is that we can then discuss it in relation to other ideas. 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 virtual pets and the Sega games amongst Japanese children has various effects, positive and negative.

Abstraction occurs in the next excerpt, which forms the conclusion to a history essay on why the British stopped sending convicts to New South Wales. Notice that the focus in the essay is not on who acted or decided, but on **reasons** for a decision.

Examples: nominalisation (underlined)	less abstract wording
The <u>suspension</u> of <u>transportation</u> to New South Wales in 1840 was due to multiple factors that occurred throughout the 1830s.	<i>when they suspended transportation; when they stopped transporting prisoners</i>
The <u>combination</u> of <u>growing opposition</u> in both the New South Wales colony and in Britain created a gradual <u>process</u> by which <u>transportation</u> was abolished.	<i>people in both NSW and Britain opposed transportation and it was gradually abolished</i>
Penal <u>reform</u> , <u>pressure</u> from Wakefieldian supporters, and colonial <u>agitation</u> concerning the moral <u>degradation</u> of society by convicts, all combined to end <u>transportation</u> in 1840.	<i>they reformed the penal laws; people who supported Wakefield pressured the government to ...; people in the colonies agitated ...; people felt convicts were ...; convicts stopped being transported</i>
There was no single defining moment or instance which instigated the end of <u>transportation</u> but rather incremental <u>shifts</u> of ideology and <u>beliefs</u> concerning the existing state of the penal colony of New South Wales.	<i>they did not stop transporting convicts suddenly ...; thinking shifted slowly; people stopped believing...</i>

The abstraction is achieved partly through **nominalisation**, whereby activity is represented using **nominal groups** rather than verbs. For example, ‘**growing opposition to transportation**’ is a nominal group: it forms one complex thing. In speech, we would be more likely to say ‘**people in the colonies became more and more opposed to transportation**’, which is a clause (contains a verb as well as nouns).

NOMINALISATIONS AND ‘READABILITY’

It can be quite difficult to read a text that includes a lot of abstraction, because information that might normally be spread across multiple clauses in speech is packed into a single nominal group (as in the example above). The people might be left out, so it is harder to recognise who is doing what. However, nominalisation has great benefits too, which is why it is used so often in academic writing. Nominalisation helps writers to:

- achieve an impersonal, objective tone
- reduce the word count
- add modifications to the nouns involved
- begin a sentence with information: “they did it because...” can become “Several reasons are often cited for...” or “The main reasons are often assumed to be...” or “The often cited but perhaps now questionable reasons for ending transportation seem to have been...”

So learning how to use nominalisation and abstraction in your own writing is an important part of becoming a sophisticated writer.

Similarly, when you paraphrase it is important to be able to remove the nominalisations in texts that you are reading, as this can show that you do understand who is doing what to whom. To remove nominalisations, you may need to introduce human actors and more verbs into a sentence (eg. “Transportation was not abandoned for years due to the dependence on convict labour” could become “The British **did not stop sending** convicts immediately, because the colony **depended** on convict labour”).

THE GRAMMAR OF NOMINALISATION

Nominalise this: Many modern artists use computers in their work.

Many	modern	artists	use	computers	in their work
determiner	adjective	noun	verb	noun	prepositional phrase
<p>1. Identify the main verb in the clause - ‘use’</p> <p>2. Change the verb into noun form - ‘use’ or ‘deployment’</p> <p>3. Make noun head of a complex nominal group - ‘The modern artists’ deployment’... ‘The modern artists’ deployment of computers’... ‘The modern artists’ strategic deployment of computers in their work’</p>					

From this example you can see how any clause could be changed into some kind of abstraction that can then be modified with various adjectives and phrases to add information to the idea. This process, however, removes the original verb, so to complete a sentence, another verb must be used, for example:

The modern artists’ use of computers in their work enables greater creativity.

The expanding use of various computer technologies in contemporary art practice enables greater creativity.



COMPARE

In the following table, you can see two versions presenting the same information. The ‘b’ versions condense the sentences by using nominalisations. Notice how clauses are modified by removing who or what does the action:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 1(a) | The British transported convicts to New South Wales in the early 1800s. This gave them a cheap and efficient source of labour for the developing colony. |
| (b) | The transportation of convicts to New South Wales in the early 1800s provided a cheap and efficient source of labour for the developing colony |
| 2(a) | Convicts were allocated to private citizens in New South Wales to work on private properties. The convicts were rarely paid for their labour. |
| (b) | Convicts were allocated to private citizens in New South Wales to work on private properties with little or no payment for their labour. |
| 3(a) | Many colonists opposed transportation because they believed that no penal colony would ever be allowed to become independent. |
| (b) | Opposition to transportation by the colonists was based on the idea that no penal colony would ever be allowed to become independent. |
| 4(a) | Convicts provided a cheap source of labour, which allowed the colony to grow and expand. |
| (b) | The provision of convicts to the colony as a cheap source of labour contributed to the growth and expansion of the colony. |
| 5(a) | Convicts were assigned to private citizens. This was criticised and compared to slavery. |
| (b) | The assignment of convicts to private citizens was criticised and compared to slavery. |

MAKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEAS CLEAR

When you use nominalisations to be concise, you should make sure it is clear how things are related. For example, we can link ideas in terms of cause/effect, comparison/contrast etc. Look at the following simple sentences:

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

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

They could be collapsed to form one sentence, but what is the relationship between the ideas? You could relate them by:

- comparison/ contrast
- cause/ effect
- adding information
- drawing a conclusion.

If the relationship is cause and effect, we could say:

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

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

The verb ‘enable’ indicates a cause/effect relationship, and the sentences could be combined into a shorter version, by using nominalisation:

The modern artists’ use of computers enables greater creativity.



COMPARE

In the following, notice how the relationship between ideas is made explicit by nominalising the words in bold:

- 1(a) I think euthanasia is **important**. It is important because it **concerns** human rights.
(b) *The importance of euthanasia is due to its concern with human rights.*
- 2(a) Women are **administered** drugs to release many eggs to get **fertilised**. These drugs can **affect** women bodies in the longer term.
(b) *The administration of drugs to produce numerous eggs for fertilisation can have a long term effect on women's bodies.*
- 3(a) Humans **use** animals for medical research. Many drugs have been **discovered**.
(b) *The use of animals in medical research has resulted in the discovery of many drugs.*
- 4(a) Sows are continually **impregnated**. They **produce** up to five litters every two years.
(b) *The continual impregnation of sows can result in production of up to five litters every two years.*

