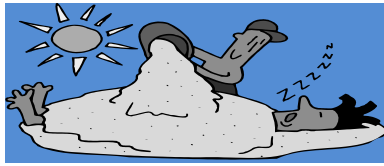


FROM THE LEGAL WRITING CLINIC
WRITING TIP OF THE WEEK

AVOID NOMINALIZATIONS--UNCOVER THE BURIED VERBS



One of the best ways to improve your writing is to use active verbs instead of nominalizations. A nominalization is a verb that has been turned into a noun. For example, as nominalizations, the verbs “state” and “assume” become the nouns “statement” and assumption.” Words that end in -ment, -ion, -ence, -ance, -ity, -ent, -ant, and -ancy are often nominalizations.

Nominalizations lead to wordiness. When you turn a verb into a noun, the sentence then requires additional verbs, prepositions and articles. Nominalizations also tend to lead to passive voice and weaker verb choice.

- **Nominalization:** The usage of the property by the defendants was for the storage of firewood and building materials. (17 words; passive voice; weak verb)
- **Better:** The defendants stored firewood and building materials on the property. (10 words; active voice; stronger verb—“stored” instead of “was”; you don’t need “usage” at all)
- **Nominalization:** An agreement was made by the parties to reach a decision by Friday. (13 words; passive voice; weak verb)
- **Better:** The parties agreed to decide by Friday. (7 words; active voice; stronger verbs—“agreed” and “decide”)
- **Nominalization:** The intention of Congress was for the interpretation of the statute to be made broadly by the courts. (18 words; passive voice; weak verbs)
- **Better:** Congress intended the courts to interpret the statute broadly. (9 words; active voice; stronger verbs--“intended” and “interpret”)

Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, Just Writing, 78-79, 81, 116-17, 127 (4th ed. 2013); Laurel Currie Oates & Anne Enquist, The Legal Writing Handbook 178-79, 521, 556-58 (5th ed. 2010); C. Edward Good, Legal Writing & Its Cure ch. 3 (reprinted in Lawmanac—Clickable Help for Legal Writers 2009).