

A Verb's Lament

On a hunch, I stepped into a bar around the corner from an office building filled with law firms. B.B. King riffs filled the smoky room. And there it was: Sitting at the bar, with its head hung over a Scotch and water, was a verb.

Author: Why so glum?

Verb: You know, just the usual stuff.

Author: What usual stuff?

Verb: Well, it's those lawyers again. A lot of them just don't seem to like me. They make me feel so...so...well... *nominalized*.

Author: Buddy, I'm no psychiatrist. What do you mean?

Verb: I'm a nice, simple verb, but they aren't satisfied with that. They try to change me into some highfalutin, abstract noun with a bunch of extra words.

Author: Give me an example.

Verb: Sure. Suppose a lawyer wants to say that a statute "protects" a certain class of people. That's just fine the way it is. But many lawyers inflate simple verbs like *protects* to make them sound more impressive: "The statute *provides protection for* workers who are discriminated against because of their age." That took three words to say what one simple verb said better. They...they do it to me all the time. [The author hands the verb a tissue.]

Author: Does nominalizing a verb always add extra words?

Verb: I can't see how it wouldn't. Sometimes it takes three, four, even five words to say what one little verb says just fine. Check these out:

Example: The defendant *made the argument* that the plaintiff's lawsuit was untimely.

Better: The defendant *argued* that the plaintiff's lawsuit was untimely.

Example: The parties *engaged in a discussion over* the possibility of settlement.

Better: The parties *discussed* the possibility of settlement.

Author: I see the improvement.

Verb: Some writing experts call nominalized verbs "buried" verbs. A writer who nominalizes a verb has killed the poor thing, so it might as well be buried. It's verbiicide!

Author: Settle down, fella. Is this really that big a deal?

Verb: Imagine being forced to read these wordy, lifeless nominalizations page after page in a long brief. Which style do you think a busy judge would rather read?

Author: Okay, okay, I get it. But what makes you think that lawyers are the culprits?

Verb: Don't get me started on letters to clients, with all that *we have effectuated*

service on junk instead of *we served*. And I see it in briefs all the time.

Author: Prove it.

Verb: Okay, smart guy. Here are some real-life examples:

Brief: "This event... *caused an interruption in* the flow of their testimony."

Better: This event *interrupted* the flow of their testimony.

Brief: "Neither she nor any other individual had *made an assessment of* [the] attachment."

Better: Neither she nor anyone else had *assessed* the attachment.

Brief: "APHIS then *undertook an investigation into* the cause of the larvae finds."

Better: APHIS then *investigated* the cause of the larvae finds.

Author: You've certainly done some digging.

Verb: You and your lawyer friends will impress judges, judicial clerks, and clients far more if you just give us verbs a chance.

Author: Yeah, well, I guess now we've come to an understanding about each other.

Verb: You mean, now we *understand* each other. You're all hopeless. Bartender!

This piece first appeared in the Winter 2005 issue of The Scrivener, the newsletter of Scribes—The American Society of Writers on Legal Subjects. ♦

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