

Characteristics

of

Formal

Language

~

Year 10 English

## Using passive voice to shift the focus of a clause

The focus or orientation point of a clause can be shifted by choosing either the **active** or the **passive** form of the verb. As we saw in Chapter 2, if a clause is active, the person or thing *doing* the action comes first in the clause. If a clause is passive, the person or thing *affected by* the action comes first.



### Exercise 5.12 Changing the focus of a clause

Change the focus of the following clauses by completing both the active and passive forms. Highlight the themes in each clause. The first clause is completed as an example.

<b>Example</b>	Active	Soldiers	destroyed	the entire village.
	Passive	The entire village	was destroyed	by soldiers.

1 **Active** Early settlers cleared large areas of rainforest for industrial use.

**Passive** \_\_\_\_\_

2 **Active** \_\_\_\_\_

**Passive** Poor countries are being affected by climate change.

3 **Active** Farmers cut down trees for wood.

**Passive** \_\_\_\_\_

We use the active form when we want to focus on the person or thing doing the action (ie the 'responsible' participant). We use the passive form when we want to focus on the person or thing affected by the action. The passive form enables speakers and writers not only to change the theme of a clause, but also to 'ignore' and leave out the responsible participant altogether. In the sentence below, for example, the people responsible for the destruction of the village are not identified.

*The entire village was destroyed.*

Because the passive form makes it possible to leave out the 'responsible' participant, it is often used in historical and bureaucratic discourse and news stories, especially when the writer wants an event, outcome or phenomenon to be more prominent in a text, than those responsible. If teachers make this use of the passive form of the verb explicit to students, this knowledge will help them develop critical literacy.

# Nominalisation: moving towards abstraction

In this section we look at another important textual resource – **nominalisation**.

Nominalisation is the process of turning words that are not typically nouns (ie verbs, conjunctions, adjectives, and adverbs) into nouns. For example, the verb *employ* can be 'nominalised' as the noun *employment*. Different ways of forming nominalisations are shown in Grammar summary 5.6.

Nominalisation is an important resource for building abstract nouns, as well as technical terms based on abstract nouns. Before exploring the forms nominalisation can take, we shall compare Texts 5.13 and 5.14 to illustrate the difference between concrete everyday language and the nominalised abstract language used by specialists in their field.

## **Exercise 5.13** Comparing concrete language and abstract language

Read Texts 5.14 and 5.15 and answer the questions which follow.

### **Text 5.14**

When people clear land for houses and roads they change the environment. They destroy the forest and bushland and so many animals lose their homes. Some animals have become extinct because their homes have been destroyed. More houses and roads will pollute the environment even more.

### **Text 5.15**

Clearing and development of land often results in the destruction of the natural habitat of many local species. Loss of habitat has already led to the extinction of many species of animals. Land degradation may also increase the level of pollution.

- 1 What are the main differences between these texts?

---



---

- 2 Which text do you think would be more highly 'valued' as students move through school? Why?

---



---

The main differences between Text 5.14 and Text 5.15 relate to the use of 'nominalisation'. Text 5.14 uses everyday concrete language to describe the impact of people's actions which are represented by processes, and the people and things in the actions by participants. The participants in Text 5.15, in contrast, are combinations of actions condensed and packaged as abstract nouns (eg *destruction, pollution, loss, extinction*). The logic that relates the abstract participants is represented in relating processes (eg *results in, led to, increase*).

## Identifying and forming nominalisations

As we noticed above, nominalisation occurs when we convert verbs, conjunctions, adjectives or adverbs into nouns. Texts containing a great deal of nominalisation can seem dense and difficult to read. This is because nominalisation changes how information is 'packaged' in a clause. Different ways of forming nominalisations are illustrated in Grammar summary 5.6.

Grammar summary 5.6 Forming nominalisations			
Types of nominalisation			Examples
From verb to noun	Many verbs can be changed into nouns	by adding a suffix to the verb form	discuss → discussion identify → identity arrange → arrangement
		by using the form verb +ing	her acting an old saying
	Some verbs can be used as abstract nouns without any change		the cause, a visit, a struggle
From conjunction to noun	Nouns can also be used to represent relationships typically expressed by conjunctions	expressing cause	The customer left <b>because</b> the food was cold. (conjunction) The customer's <b>reason</b> for leaving was the cold food. (noun)
		expressing comparison	Roebourne is a small town <b>whereas</b> Karratha is large. (conjunction) One <b>difference</b> between Roebourne and Karratha is their size. (noun)
From adjective to noun	Adjectives can also be nominalised i.e. turned into a noun form		expensive → expense unstable → instability tense → tension
From clause to noun group	Noun groups containing nominalisations are often used to condense meanings that would otherwise be spread across a number of clauses		I am going to develop my ideas in a logical way <b>  </b> because that helps me structure my essay. The logical <b>development</b> of ideas contributes to the <b>structure</b> of an essay.

### Exercise 5.14 Identifying nominalisations

Using Grammar summary 5.7 to help you, highlight the nominalisations in the following clauses. The noun groups containing nominalisations have been underlined. The first clause is completed as an example.

**Example** Ecologists study the division of the land's surfaces into biomes.

- 1 Each biome has a distinctive combination of life forms.
- 2 The distribution of habitats such as coral reefs is an important consideration for marine biologists.
- 3 Animals that eat other animals are known as secondary consumers.
- 4 These studies can assist with an understanding of population growth.
- 5 Greenpeace uses non-violent creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems.
- 6 The burning of fossil fuels has significantly altered the atmosphere.
- 7 This process is called evaporation.

You may have noticed that some of the nominalisations in Exercise 5.13 were part of complex noun groups and some had more than one nominalisation (eg *understanding* and *growth*). One of the effects of nominalisation is that it condenses meaning into the noun group. Once something has been turned into a noun or *nominalised*, we can then use all the resources of the noun group to further describe, classify, evaluate or measure it. Grammar summary 5.7 describes the functions of the resources for modifying nominalisations.

Grammar summary 5.7 Nominalisation and the noun group		
Classifiers	Classifiers can help define the main noun by specifying type or subject area. Many of these are also abstractions	medical facilities, physical isolation, political unrest, economic rationalism
Describers	Describers (adjectivals) often express importance or significance	complex internal relationships, widespread political unrest
	Adverbs can be added to intensify describers	extremely complex internal relationships
Quantifiers	Quantifiers (adjectivals) may help generalise about quantity or extent	additional medical facilities, several contributing factors, many important reasons
Qualifiers	Qualifiers (adjectival phrases and clauses) help expand the meaning of the abstract noun and are often a vital part of condensed, specialised noun groups built around nominalisations	A rapid increase in the <u>rate of population growth</u> ... The inconvenience and expense of <u>participation in programs</u> such as <u>this</u> ...

## In the classroom

Students can be helped to read dense, specialised texts with a high proportion of complex and abstract noun groups if the teacher asks them first to find the process in each clause (often a relating or cause-effect process) and then to use the probe questions introduced in Chapter 2 to identify the abstractions used as participants.

### Exercise 5.15 Describing and classifying nominalisations

The following noun groups all contain nominalisations (shown in bold). Increase the complexity of the noun groups by modifying the nominalisations to expand the meaning of the noun group as indicated. You may want to refer to Grammar summary 5.7 to help you.

- 1 a variety of \_\_\_\_\_ influences  
(describer) (classifier)
- 2 another \_\_\_\_\_ solution  
(describer) (classifier)
- 3 the \_\_\_\_\_ destruction [of \_\_\_\_\_ ]  
(intensifier) (describer) (phrase as qualifier)
- 4 a \_\_\_\_\_ decision [[that \_\_\_\_\_ ]]  
(classifier) (clause as qualifier)

Nominalisation is used to condense a lot of meaning, which might otherwise have been expressed using one or more clauses, in order to repackage it as a single, abstract noun. Further meanings can be added to the abstract noun, including describers, classifiers and qualifiers, to build an extended noun group which functions as a single participant in a clause. These condensed re-packaged meanings are what makes specialised written language so different from everyday spoken language, and for many students so much more challenging to understand.

## In the classroom

Students moving into the middle years of schooling are expected to use nominalisation to demonstrate that they understand the abstract concepts central to specialised subjects. Guidance in *unpacking* (for reading) and *repacking* (for writing) the nominalisations in their textbooks and other reading materials will support students as they make the transition to the reading of the abstract and condensed texts used to build knowledge in the secondary years.

### Exercise 5.16 Packaging meanings

Use nominalisation to redraft the following examples. Try to compact the meaning represented in each example into a single *simple sentence*. To do this you will need to build a noun group around a nominalisation, then decide how the noun groups *relate* to each other. You may want to refer back to Grammar summaries 5.6 and 5.7 to help you. Write your more abstract, condensed version in the space provided.

**Example Original** When people plant a lot of crops year after year, many of the nutrients go out of the soil.

**Rewritten** Overcropping often causes a breakdown in the soil.

- 1 Over the last couple of years, people from all over the world have been arguing about whether or not the hole in the ozone layer has been getting bigger.

---



---

- 2 Many people live in urban areas but if the population gets too high the city will get really polluted and there mightn't be enough houses for people to live in.

---



---



---

You may have noticed that the verbs you used to re-write the sentences are mostly relating verbs, either 'being' (eg *is*) or of cause/effect (eg *causes*, *results in*). As we saw in Chapter 3, these verbs are used to express logic in metaphorical ways.

Nominalisation enables students to identify abstract ideas, arguments, reasons, factors and causes. It is an important resource for the successful development of many factual text types. For example, it is often through nominalisation that we are able to introduce technical terms into explanations and reports. Nominalisation also enables writers and speakers to:

- sum up an explanation sequence or process using a single technical term (eg *evaporation*, *urbanisation*).
- 'get their themes right' – Many theme patterns rely on nominalisation to condense previous information into a single word that can then be used in the clause theme to move the information along in a paragraph. The nominalisation *evaporation* is used in this way in a zigzag pattern of theme development in the following example:

*When the sun heats up the water, it evaporates into steam. Evaporation causes the steam to rise into the air.*

- use abstractions representing general categories of meaning (eg *reasons*, *factors*, *issues*, *arguments*) as headings and in text and paragraph openers to signpost the organisation of the information in the text. These terms can be used as a framework for reading, research and note-taking.