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Be Cautious Using Nouns as Adjectives

A string of modifying nouns makes a heavy meal

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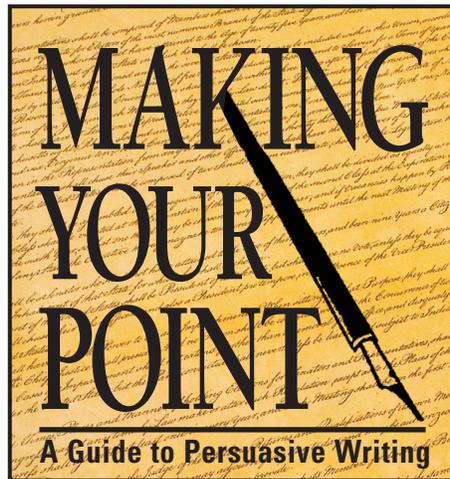
Adjectives describe nouns. In grammatical jargon, we say they “modify” nouns. One noun can support more than one adjective, as in “a vicious, interminable quarrel.” The adjectives “vicious” and “interminable” characterize the intensity and duration of the quarrel. A series of adjectives can be an effective way to home in.

But a series of adjectives won’t work as well when the adjectives are nouns used as adjectives (“noun adjectives”), such as “venue” in “venue motion” and “settlement” in “settlement talks.” Strings of noun adjectives are not reader-friendly. They repeatedly offer the reader false closure, as in the following sentence regarding electronic discovery costs:

The court ordered further proceedings to determine electronic document production expense allocation.

The topic is cost allocation for producing electronic documents. Four modifiers precede the noun “allocation”: electronic, document, production and expense. Of those four, only one is

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an adjective by nature. The others three are nouns used as adjectives: “document,” “production” and “expense.”

Readers seeing the verb “to determine” instinctively begin looking for a direct object — something that answers the question “determine what?” A reader’s initial reaction on seeing a noun in that slot is to view it as an object, not a modifier, because nouns that follow verbs tend to serve as objects.

The first noun after the verb is “document,” momentarily suggesting that the court ordered further proceedings to “determine [an] electronic document.” For several reasons, the reader will quickly deduce that “document” has been used as an adjective: The “an” is missing; one doesn’t “determine” documents; and the sentence continues with another noun. But the deductive process will, naturally, require effort.

The reader will then look to the next noun, “production,” as a possible

object of the verb “determine.” Momentarily, the reader will think the court ordered further proceedings “to determine [an] electronic document production.”

That makes some sense, but the “an” is still missing, and another noun follows. So the reader will conclude that “production” is not the direct object of “determine” and will move on to “expense,” still looking for the direct object, thinking briefly that the court determined “electronic document production expense.”

But one more noun follows: “allocation.” Now the reader can sense that some sort of allocation of cost is involved, but the work required to glean that insight has been substantial. By this time, the reader has had enough of the sentence. The string of three noun adjectives is oppressive.

Noun adjectives not only confuse the reader grammatically, but they tend to be conceptual rather than descriptive, and thus they fail to home in. Consider the nouns used as adjectives in the above sentence: document, production and expense.

“Document” covers a lot of ground. It is inclusive rather than descriptive. “Production” is a process and thus amorphous, conceptual rather than visual. Similarly, “expense” creates no images. The multiple denotations and connotations potentially associated with these open-ended words allow the reader to drift from the desired path.

To fix the sentence, we can bring “allocation” forward so that it appears immediately after “determined,” applying the rule of thumb that a direct object should come as soon as possible after the verb:

The court ordered further pro-

ceedings to determine the allocation of electronic document production expense.

Now the reader quickly learns that what has to be determined is an allocation. The order of information is more attuned to the reader's hard-wired expectation that the direct object will immediately follow the verb.

But the reader still has to wait for the answer to the question "allocation of what?" Two noun adjectives (document and production) still precede the noun that says what was allocated (expense).

We can move the concept of expense forward and change "expense" to "cost," which is more precise, one syllable shorter and rhythmically better. Also, instead of "allocation," we'll use "how to allocate," which is sharper:

The court ordered further proceedings to determine how to allocate the cost of electronic document production.

Now the reader immediately learns that what has to be determined is how to allocate cost. What cost? The cost of electronic document production.

But wait. We can also bring forward the word that tells the reader what the

cost is associated with, that is, the production of documents:

The court ordered further proceedings to determine how to allocate the cost of producing electronic documents.

Now the reader learns in rapid sequence that what has to be determined is (i) how to allocate (ii) the cost (iii) of producing documents. Only one word is a modifier — electronic — and it's an adjective by nature. The phrase "electronic documents" also finishes well. It's crisp and strong in a position of prominence at the end of the sentence.

One further thought. "To determine how to allocate" is implicit in the verb "allocate." Shortening the sentence works even better:

The court ordered further proceedings to allocate the cost of producing electronic documents.

Puzzler

How would you tighten and sharpen the following sentence?

The matter of eligibility for a casino license is specifically

addressed in Section 82b of the Act, which identifies those persons who are "eligible" to hold a casino license.

If we wish to use the opening clause of this sentence, we can delete "The matter of" and begin with "Eligibility" because no reader cares that eligibility for a casino license is a "matter." We can also delete "specifically" because the word "identifies" tells the reader that the Act specifically states who is eligible to hold a casino license.

But we don't need the opening clause. Except for the section of the Act, the information it conveys is provided later.

In the clause that remains, drop "who are" as unnecessary and retain "those" to make clear that Section 82b covers all persons eligible, not just some persons eligible.

The revised version:
Section 82b of the Act identifies those persons eligible to hold a casino license.

Alternate version:
Section 82b of the Act specifies who is eligible to hold a casino license. ■