Nominal or verbal style: things vs actions

Nominal style (or nominalisation) is characteristic of more formal writing, but it can make a document difficult to read.

A construction that influences the degree of liveliness in a text and helps to focus the reader’s attention on the theme and less on the action related to the theme, is the so-called nominalization, a construction that arises when a sentence or sentence fragment is converted into a phrase containing as its core-element a noun that is derived from the corresponding verb. This is the case when a sentence such as *The house has been altered* is converted to *the alteration of the house* (the noun *alteration* is derived from the verb *altered*). Nominalizations move the perspective away from the aspect of action in the text, and by implication also away from the doer of the action, and this causes the text to be less person-orientated and also less lively.

The nominalizations have been indicated in the following extract from an annual report. When the text is re-written, the constructions are replaced with a corresponding verb construction (a sentence).

**Example**

The nouns that have been derived from verbs are printed in italics:

With this *restructuring, decision-making* has been decentralised to give individual managers greater flexibility to be able to react more quickly to the *challenges* of changing market and client expectations. This has led to a successful *shift* from the traditional product-oriented culture to a dynamic, client-driven ethos. In order to increase financial performance, each business is focused on the *delivery* of value to its clients. http://documentdesign.sun.ac.za/document-design/style/formality-an-issue-of-distance/nominal-or-verbal-style-things-vs-actions

What we are dealing with in this case is a more formal text, and the use of nominalizations is therefore justified. However, even in a formal text one can have too many nominalizations, which can stifle the text as a result of the reduced emphasis on the active aspect. In the following version of the fragment, some of the nominalizations have been converted into constructions containing the underlying verb:

**Example**

Because the company has been restructured, we now take decisions on a decentralised basis in order to give individual managers greater flexibility to react quickly to the *challenges* of changing market and client expectations. This means that we have successfully shifted from a traditional, product-oriented culture to a dynamic, client-driven ethos. In order to increase financial performance, each business is now focussed on delivering value to its clients.

When you have to eliminate the nominalizations, you are naturally forced to name the role player who is executing the action. It is here that the danger of this construction lies: It often hides the doer and the text then loses its “humanity” and liveliness.

However, one should also state that there is a positive side: Nominalizations have two important functions:

- They enable the writer to state something in a more economical manner
- They can indeed also be used to increase the objectiveness of the text where it is appropriate
However, it is very difficult for a reader to process a text in which many nominalizations occur, particularly because of the degree of difficulty that is associated with this type of construction. It is therefore very important that writers use a great deal of caution when applying the construction in their texts.