

# NOMINALISATION AND NOUN PHRASES key

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## Why is this sentence ambiguous?

*We visited their country house.*

It could mean ‘we visited one of two houses they own, the one in the country (rather than the one in the city)’

It might mean ‘we visited their only house, which is in the country’

Greater clarity can be achieved by post modification:

- i. *We visited their house, which is in the country. (their only house)*
- ii. *We visited their house that is in the country. (one of two)*

**However**, the alternatives (clausal post modification) are heavier and would only be used if A) a reader cannot be expected to know which meaning is intended, and B) the distinction is of crucial importance (as may be the case in scientific writing). In this example, ‘country house’ is a fairly fixed unit (like *car keys*, *skate board*, *hair cut* etc), and the distinction would be unlikely ever to matter much.

## Why might the following be ambiguous?

*A small business loan*

*A green apple pie*

*A fresh cheese cake*

Adjective + noun modifier + headword combinations can sometimes be ambiguous. If the noun+noun component is a recognizably fixed unit (cheese cake, apple pie), it should be kept. If it is less so (small business loan), you should consider less ambiguous alternatives (e.g. a small loan for a business/ a loan for a small business).

[http://www.grammar-quizzes.com/adj\\_nounmodifiers.html](http://www.grammar-quizzes.com/adj_nounmodifiers.html)

## Consider the following sentences. Do any of them sound odd? Why?

*The book is on the table in the corner.*

*The book is on the corner table.*

*The girl in the corner is reading the book .*

*The corner girl is reading the book.*

Noun+noun indicates relative permanence of an arrangement. A table can reasonably be expected to be relatively permanently in the same corner in a room, a girl not.

## Which of the following three sentences ‘doesn’t work’? Why?

*The lab instrument doesn’t work.*

*The lab technician doesn’t work.*

*The lab professor doesn’t work.*

The lab professor is unlikely, as it is not part of a professor's job description (unlike that of a lab technician) to spend much time in the lab.

**Make two-word noun + noun combinations for each of the following:**

*The lens of the binoculars* \_\_\_\_\_ the binocular lens \_\_\_\_\_

*The leg of the trousers* \_\_\_\_\_ the trouser leg \_\_\_\_\_

*The race to obtain arms* \_\_\_\_\_ the arms race \_\_\_\_\_

*A piece of news (from TV, radio or newspapers)* \_\_\_\_\_ a news item \_\_\_\_\_

*The blades of the scissors* \_\_\_\_\_ the scissor blades \_\_\_\_\_

*An epidemic of mumps* \_\_\_\_\_ a mumps epidemic \_\_\_\_\_

Some nouns only exist in the plural (binoculars, trousers, scissors). If these are used as premodifiers they are usually used in the singular (functioning grammatically as adjectives, which are invariable). There are, however, exceptions to this (arms, news, mumps).

**How are the following pairs of sentences different?**

*a heavy metal detector* / *a heavy-metal detector* (*a metal detector that is heavy* / *a detector of heavy metals*)

*a man eating shark* / *a man-eating shark* (*a man who is eating shark* / *a shark that eats men*)

*a French language film* / *a French-language film* (*a French film about language* / *a film in French*)

*a little appreciated book* / *a little-appreciated book* (*a small book that is appreciated* / *a book that is not appreciated*)

Often the choice of whether to hyphenate or not is a matter of personal preference as usually the intended meaning will be clear from context. However, if this is not the case, then hyphenation may help avoid ambiguity.

More on hyphenation at <http://www.grammar.cl/english/compound-adjectives.htm>

**Which of the following is more natural? Or are both options acceptable? Is there a difference in meaning?**

*books for children* / *children's books* both correct, latter more common, same meaning usually (also: books written for children vs books belonging to children)

*Parkinson disease* / *Parkinson's disease* Parkinson's disease is correct, same meaning (however, the former is gaining ground in popularity in scientific writing)

*for the sake of convenience* / *for convenience' sake* both good and equally common, same meaning

*in ten years' time* / *ten years from now* both good and equally common, same meaning

*Jon and Cathy's dogs* / *Jon's and Cathy's dogs* both good but have different meanings (former: J and K share same dogs; latter: each have own dogs). Former may also mean Jon with C's dogs but without C'.

Possessive 's forms are not frequent in academic writing, so always ask yourself if there is an alternative (often it will be a simple noun premodifier, e.g. *school holidays* rather than *school's holidays*).

This is a complex and evolving area (see <http://expertedge.aje.com/2013/07/23/editing-tip-of-the-week-eponyms/>). By reading widely you will develop an instinct for when you might reasonably use 's in your formal academic/scientific writing.

More information at:

- <https://awc.ashford.edu/grammar-pos-possessives.html>
- <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/possessives.htm>
- <http://expertedge.aje.com/2013/07/30/editing-tip-of-the-week-apostrophe-usage-in-academic-writing/>
- <http://expertedge.aje.com/2013/07/23/editing-tip-of-the-week-eponyms/>

Compare the following pairs of sentences. What is the main difference between them?

<p>Researchers have to judge <b>how valid and reliable the web sites are</b>.</p> <p><b>How the babies moved their limbs</b> was tracked by sensors.</p> <p>Results suggest <b>that students use the WWW widely</b>.</p> <p>It is now possible <b>to mass produce pure human antibodies</b>.</p> <p><b>Women have a weaker immune response to allergens</b> with each successive pregnancy.</p>	<p>Researchers have to judge <b>the validity and reliability of the web sites</b>.</p> <p><b>The movement of the babies' limbs</b> was tracked by sensors.</p> <p>Results suggest <b>widespread use of the WWW by students</b>.</p> <p><b>The mass production of pure human antibodies</b> is now possible.</p> <p><b>Women's immune response to allergens</b> weakens with each successive pregnancy.</p>
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Use of noun phrases in sentences in right-hand column sound more academic-scientific. Use of verbs, adjectives and adverbs in left-hand column is more informal/conversational.

A verb, adjective or adverb is replaced by its equivalent noun form in the noun phrase. For example:

valid, reliable (adj) --> *validity, reliability* (n)  
 how ... moved (v)--> *the movement* (n)  
 use (v) ... widely (adv) --> *widespread* (adj) *use* (n)  
 mass produce (v) --> *the mass production* (n)

Academic writing characterized by frequent use of nominalization (verbs and adjectives typically transformed into nouns and noun phrases), deflecting focus from people and actions to phenomena, processes, procedures and events (with consequent greater use of passive forms).

Practice passives at

- <http://www.uefap.com/writing/exercise/feature/pasex2.htm>
- <http://www.uefap.com/writing/exercise/feature/pasex3.htm>

**Task 1: Rewrite the following sentences to make them more academic.**

1. The test aimed to prove how playable the game was. (the test aimed to prove the playability of the game)
2. The blades were extremely sharp and this made them highly effective weapons.(the extreme sharpness of the blades made them highly effective weapons)
3. There was a clear pattern to how participants self-assessed their performance. (participants' self-assessment of their performance showed a clear pattern)
4. The map shows where the new areas of forestry are. (the map shows the location of the new areas of forestry)
5. This study clearly demonstrates that diet greatly influences toddlers' behaviour. (this study clearly demonstrates the influence of diet on toddlers' behavior)

**Task 3: Compress the following noun phrases (all post modified with adjective clauses) to make them more formal and academic-sounding.**

1. people who create web pages (web page creators)
2. treatments that are based on antibodies (antibody-based treatments)
3. people who are infected with HIV (people infected with HIV)
4. a part of the course that must be completed (a mandatory part of the course, a part of the course to be completed)
5. Data that have been released recently (recently/freshly/newly released data)
6. Research that has been done recently (recent research)
7. Plants that are grown in this manner (plants grown this way)
8. The fossils that have been newly unearthed (newly unearthed fossils)
9. Some of the radio stations that broadcast on shortwave (some of the shortwave radio stations)
10. Researchers who know a lot about the subject (knowledgeable researchers)
11. Children who speak two languages (bilingual children)
12. A company that is run by the state (a state-run company)
13. The research that has been reported here (the research reported here)

**Task 4: Underline all the noun phrases in the following text.**

Autonomous learning has been defined as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' and it is associated with students taking a more active role in the learning process (Holec, 1981). The autonomous learner is viewed as an 'independent, self-directed life-long learner' (Betts, 2004). These students, therefore, do not confine themselves to the material being taught, but rather take an active role in seeking and processing information and developing transfer skills to apply information in a broader context for their own needs or interests (Chan, 2003). For the purpose of defining someone as educated, they must be able to incorporate new information with old, actively engaging in the process of learning, rather than simply learning content (Barr and Tag, 1995; Cross, 1999; Greene, 1988; Howell, 2002, 2006). Suggested modes of promoting learner autonomy include tiered assignments (with one assignment building on the foundation of the previous), flexible groupings (which allows for students to pick and choose within assignments) (Betts, 2004), and problem-based learning (students are given the opportunity to engage in independent problem solving) (Van Den Hurk, 2006). The education process should be viewed as a long-term aptitude development effort that seeks to foster personal preparedness for later stages of life (Jimenez Raya and Perez Fernandez, 2002). Therefore, it is important to identify methodological/pedagogical frameworks that foster the development of learner autonomy.