



Breaking the Chains

by Raymond P. Ward

Fred Rodell once complained that bad law-review writing often “looks as though it had been translated from the German by someone with a rather meager knowledge of English.” *Good-bye to Law Reviews*, 23 Va. L. Rev. 38, 39 (1936–37). I often think of Rodell’s complaint when reading something full of noun chains.

Richard Wydick coined the term “noun chain” to describe a series of three or more consecutive nouns, with all but the last functioning as adjectives. *Plain English for Lawyers* 75 (4th ed. 1998). Noun chains occur because in English, a word normally used as one part of speech can often function as another. This shift in grammatical function is called “functional variation.” One of the most common types of functional variation occurs when a noun is used as an adjective. Bryan A. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage* 371 (2003). For example, the noun *baseball* can be an adjective modifying *game*.

A two-noun combination such as *baseball game* presents no problem. The problems begin when three or more nouns appear in succession. For example:



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- baseball game ticket
- baseball game ticket price
- baseball game ticket price increase
- baseball game ticket price increase proposal

Wydick frets that noun chains like these may strangle readers, or rather cause “noun chain reader strangulation problems.”

Lawyers love noun chains. We think nothing of writing about a “drug discount program” administered by a “pharmacy benefit management company.” Some legislators in my home state once got together and created the “Compulsory Motor Vehicle Liability Security Law.” I once read a headnote talking about a “housing conservation district review committee’s failure” to do something, and I wondered how that apostrophe-*s* slipped past the editor.

Environmental law seems to be a hothouse for noun chains. Consider these offenses to euphony, which I collected in just one day while researching an environmental issue:

- cost recovery action
- remedy selection process
- television antenna manufacturing facility
- waste water treatment process
- sand transfer mitigation efforts
- New Mexico drinking water standards
- EPA land use concentration standards
- Phase I Groundwater Quality Evaluation Report

There are two problems with noun chains. First, they create God-awful prose. Second, they ruin readability. As Bryan Garner writes, “the problem is that many readers will think they’ve hit upon the noun when they’re still reading adjectives.” *Garner’s Modern American Usage* at 557. The reader has to slow down and figure out the sentence, mentally converting each noun into an adjective until finally reaching the end of the chain. All that extra work slows the reader’s comprehension, which in turn impedes the writing’s persuasiveness.

Ironically, noun chains sometimes happen when we try too hard

to improve our writing by being concise. We read Garner’s advice to eliminate *unnecessary* prepositional phrases (e.g., *The Winning Brief* 165), and carry that good advice to an unhealthy extreme: we attempt to “improve” a piece of writing by deleting *all* prepositions and converting the objects of the prepositional phrases into noun-adjectives. Thus, we change *process for treating waste water* into *waste water treatment process*—and congratulate ourselves for our conciseness. Meanwhile, the poor reader is retching as if he or she had drunk some of that waste water.

To eliminate noun chains, remember two rules:

1. The last noun in the chain is the real noun, the word referring to the thing you’re talking about. The information conveyed by this word usually needs to be at or near the front of the phrase, not at the end.
2. Although a noun can function as an adjective, other parts of speech (e.g., adjectives) or grammatical structures (e.g., prepositional phrases) do a better job of modifying a noun.

Generally, the best strategy for breaking up noun chains is to push the last noun toward the front, making it the first or second word in the phrase. You then convert the following nouns into adjectives, prepositional phrases, or other grammatical structures designed to serve as modifiers. You may end up with a few extra words, but you’ll also make the writing easier to comprehend. For example:

- *before*: sand transfer mitigation efforts
- *after*: efforts to mitigate sand transfer, efforts to mitigate transfer of sand

If you have a three-noun chain, the easiest solution is to hyphenate the first two nouns. This punctuation informs the reader that the first two nouns constitute a phrasal adjective modifying the following noun. For example:

- *before*: cost recovery action
- *after*: cost-recovery action

Noun Plague, continued on page 81

Noun Plague, from page 74

- *before*: class action complaint
- *after*: class-action complaint

If the last noun in the chain is generic, such as *process*, *situation*, *activity*, and the like, try deleting it to see whether any meaning has been lost.

- *before*: afternoon thunderstorm activity
- *after*: afternoon thunderstorms

- *before*: remedy selection process
- *after*: remedy selection
- *before*: waste water treatment process
- *after*: waste-water treatment

Sometimes you can find one noun meaning the same thing as a noun-noun couplet. For example:

- *before*: pharmacy benefit management company

- *after*: pharmacy-benefit manager
- *before*: television antenna manufacturing facility
- *after*: television-antenna factory

Feel free to use one noun to modify another, but don't chain three or more nouns together. Strive for conciseness, but don't sacrifice readability to achieve it. **FD**