

Nouns as Adjectives



Adjectives modify nouns. In their simplest form, adjectives are single words, e.g., the big house. Sometimes a second noun adds information to the first noun, e.g., a house in the country. A preposition connects the two nouns, and the prepositional phrase serves as an adjective.

English grammar allows the second noun to be used directly as an adjective without the use of a preposition. Thus, country house means the same as house in the country. Other languages do not allow this convenience. For example, in Spanish, "Weed Control" must be stated "Control of Weeds" (Control de Malezas). Using nouns as adjectives is so common in English that many new words have been formed by combining the two words to form one new word, e.g., "headache", "foxtail", and "farmhouse"; instead of "ache in the head", "tail of a fox", or "house on the farm".

Nouns are used very commonly as adjectives in technical writing. Such use is proper. Word number is reduced, and the meaning is usually perfectly clear. However, in a few instances, the meaning can be ambiguous, so we must be sure the intended meaning is clear.

Whenever a noun becomes an adjective, a preposition is eliminated, and the meaning of the missing preposition must be assumed. The problem of ambiguity arises when more than one preposition could have been involved. The meaning of each of the following nouns used as an adjective is clear:

- Germination conditions = conditions for germination;
- Factory smoke = smoke from the factory;
- Application rate = rate of application;
- Student epidemic = epidemic among students.

In the following examples, there are at least two possible meanings of each noun used as an adjective.

- Soil placement = placement in the soil, or placement of the soil;
- Weed suppression = suppression of the weeds, or suppression by the weeds;
- Plant extraction = extraction of the plants, extraction from the plants, or extraction by the plants.

The sentence "Enzymatic activity suppression was evident as the reaction proceeded" is ambiguous. Without the rest of the text, it is impossible to tell whether the enzymatic activity suppressed something (suppression by enzymatic activity), or whether something suppressed enzymatic activity (suppression of enzymatic activity). The intended meaning can usually be deciphered from the rest of the text, but it is much better to eliminate the ambiguity and prevent any possible misunderstanding. Here is another ambiguous example: "Placement of N in narrow bands on the soil surface between wheat rows improved plant recovery." Whether the sentence means "recovery of N by plants" or "recovery plants from some kind of injury" cannot be determined from the sentence as written.

Nouns used as adjectives are often troublesome when several are used in a string. Words that can only be adjectives can often be used in a string without loss of clarity. When we write "The aggressive, tall, competitive annual weed . . .," it is clear that all the adjectives modify "weed." In contrast, when a long string of nouns appears, they may all modify the noun at the end of the string; some may modify each other along the line; or one may modify several that follow. The following examples show how nouns can be lined up ineffectively.

- a. The cultivar has pea enation mosaic virus resistance.
- b. The herbicide caused soybean seedling regrowth suppression.
- c. The herbicide/fertilizer impregnation process must be done at commercial establishments.
- d. Pontiac potato cultivar petiole nitrate critical nutrient ranges were established.
- e. There was no effect of fertilizer nitrogen placement geometry on spring wheat forage accumulation.

Notice how much easier these sentences are to read when some of the prepositions are restored.

- a. The cultivar resisted the virus of pea enation mosaic.
- b. The herbicide suppressed regrowth of soybean seedlings.
- c. The herbicide must be impregnated on fertilizer at commercial establishments.
- d. Critical nutrient ranges were established for petiole nitrate in the Pontiac potato cultivar.
- e. Placement geometry of fertilizer nitrogen did not affect nitrogen accumulation by wheat forage in the spring.

Some of the nouns above had been converted from verbs. Besides restoring some prepositions, changing "resistance", "suppression", and "impregnation" to verbs also improved the sentences. Example "e" was especially confusing as written, because "spring wheat" usually designates wheat planted in the spring. The sentence actually dealt with the response in the spring of fall-planted wheat.

Remember:

To use a noun as an adjective.
is procedure that is good;
But the omitted preposition
must be clearly understood.

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