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## To Verb or Not to Verb

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# TO VERB OR NOT TO VERB

Jason Dykstra

**R**ecently, a discussion of verbs derived from nouns resonated with the students in my legal writing class. The examples discussed included the good, the bad and the downright ugly. Following class, students continued to contemplate verbing, sharing examples and even cartoons.

As Calvin explained to Hobbes in Bill Watterson's 1992 comic strip:

Calvin: I like to verb words.

Hobbes: What?

Calvin: I take nouns and adjectives and use them as verbs. Remember when "access" was a thing? Now it's something you do. It got verbed. . . . Verbing weirds language.

Hobbes: Maybe we can eventually make language a complete impediment to understanding.

Conscientious verbing can enhance the effectiveness of your legal writing, while careless verbing can breed ambiguity and imprecision.

## What is verbing?

The metamorphosis of nouns into verbs, commonly called verbing or verbification, reflects a time-honored tradition in the English language of coining new uses from familiar words. Linguists use the term "functional shifting" to describe the conversion of nouns into verbs and vice versa. Verbing is common. By one estimate, about twenty percent of all verbs in English derive from nouns.<sup>1</sup>

Almost any noun can be verbed. Some verbed nouns are easy to identify because they don't change form when they become verbs: *stump*, *mouse* and *torpedo*. But, the transformation of other nouns into verbs requires the addition of an *-ize*, *-ate*, *-ify*, or *-ization*.

*Verbing bastardizes language.*

## The history of verbing

Many verbed nouns thrive only briefly before disappearing from the English lexicon. The verbed nouns that stand the test of time convey vivid images or describe innovative activities. For example, some of our oldest verbed nouns derive from animal behavior:



*The children were horsing around before the fire started.*

*The crafty lawyer outfoxed his opponent.*

*The language in the contract parrots the form book.*

Often surname-inspired verbs expire with their namesake. However, a few surname-inspired verbs long outlive their namesake. We continue to *boycott*, without giving much thought to Captain Charles Boycott, the Nineteenth century Irish land manager shunned in his community for evicting farmers from their homes. Few have heard of the Eighteenth century German physician, Franz Anton Mesmer from whose name derives the verb *mesmerize*. Almost all of our milk is *pasteurized*, thanks to French chemist Louis Pasteur.

Verbing often reflects the rapid evolution of contemporary culture; we create verbs to describe new activities:

*We faxed the discovery responses yesterday.*

*Before deciding to take the case, he googled the potential client.*

*I counseled my client to be very careful when facebooking.*

*In our leisure time, we may fish, ski, run, skateboard, mountain bike or rollerblade.*

Many newly minted verbs experience a quick demise. Mercifully, the verb *Eastwooding* survived for only a few weeks in the wake of last summer's Republican National Convention. Others linger for a period of time. For example, a few people still *Hoover* their carpets, *Thermos* their beverages, or *Simonize* their cars.

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*Those who would prefer to fossilize English have long derided the practice of verbing.*

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## The debate over verbing

Perhaps because new verbs often are the progeny of contemporary culture, the practice of verbing tends to raise the hackles of language mavens. Those who would prefer to fossilize English have long derided the practice of verbing. Twenty years ago, an editorial in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper decried verbing as a "filthy" habit that defaced the English language.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Benjamin Franklin wrote to the lexicographer Noah Webster to enlist his assistance to stem the tide of rampant verbing:

During my late absence in France, I found that several new words have been introduced. From the noun "notice" a new verb "noticed" was produced. Also "advocate" led to "advocated," and "progress" to "progressed." . . . If you should happen to be of my opinion with respect to these innovations, you will use your authority in reprobating them.<sup>3</sup>

Despite hundreds of years of derogation, verbing remains commonplace and perhaps even an integral part of English. From ancient verbs turned out from nouns, like rain, thunder and snow to modern converts like “pimp my ride.”<sup>4</sup> In the law, we advocate for clients, *Shepardize* citations, contract with vendors; we even prepare estate plans to gift.

Shakespeare masterfully derived colorful verbs from nouns like peace, uncle and ghost. In *Hamlet*, Horatio describes the gathering of an army of thugs by explaining that young Fortinbras hath “shark’d up a list of lawless resolute . . . .”<sup>5</sup> In *King Richard the Second* the Duke of York proclaims: “Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle. . . .”<sup>6</sup> From the genius of Shakespeare to Cormac McCarthy<sup>7</sup>, storytellers have explored and exploited the creative potential of verbing.

### When to verb a noun

At its best, verbing transfers the reader’s knowledge gleaned from an existing noun to a newly minted verb. Thanks to this cross-pollination, a mention that one *skis* in the winter concisely conveys a precise image.

Writers should verb nouns when conveying an image that absent verbing might require the writer include an inefficiently wordy explanation. For example, try to efficiently and precisely explain rollerblading, fly fishing, or juicing a carrot without resorting to verbing.

*The plaintiff was hit by a car while using rollerblades to transport herself down the sidewalk.*

It’s much easier and cleaner to state:  
*While rollerblading down the sidewalk, the plaintiff was hit by a car.*

The dangers of verbing are significant in legal writing. Good legal writers attempt to convey their message with plain English rather than convoluted legalese. When writers grasp at vague nouns

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turned into vaguer verbs, the results can render relatively straight-forward concepts abstract.

For example, attempts to meet and confer with opposing counsel regarding a discovery dispute could be described in an affidavit as follows:

*The Affiant attempted to contact opposing counsel in order to meet and confer.*

However, the use of precise and descriptive terms could enhance the efficacy of this testimony:

*Attempting to meet and confer, the Affiant left numerous voicemails, sent a letter, and e-mailed opposing counsel.*

At its worst, verbing can render writing almost incomprehensibly vague. Consider the following example of verbing gone wrong:

*The parties dialogued but conflicted over incentivizing which will need to be languaged.*

Whatever occurred seems important, but it cannot be readily divined from the example. It would be easily understood, however, if the nouns weren’t verbed.

*The parties disagreed about incentives during their negotiations, so that language will need to be worked out later.*

And, we writers risk confusing the reader when we discuss de-risking transactions, promise deliverables, or pledge to solutionize problems.

### To Conclusionize

Verbing enriches our language by economically conveying information with precision. As such, verbing can enhance the effectiveness of your legal writing. However, careless verbing can impart confusing ambiguity and imprecision into your writing.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Nordquist, What is Verbing?, About.com, <http://grammar.about.com/od/grammarfaq/f/verbingfaq.htm> (last visited Dec. 31, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Gertrude Block, Language Tips, 82-Jan.N.Y.St. B.J. 54 (January 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Technically, the phrase “pimp my ride” is arguably a double anthimeria, the noun has been verbed and the verb nouned.

<sup>5</sup> *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 1. Available at <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.1.1.html>

<sup>6</sup> *The Life and Death of Richard the Second*, Act 2, Scene 3. Available at <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/richardii/richardii.2.3.html>

<sup>7</sup> Scott Esposito, Cormac McCarthy’s Paradox of Choice: One Writer, Ten Novels, and a Career-Long Obsession, *The Quarterly Conversation*, <http://quarterlyconversation.com/cormac-mccarthy-paradox-of-choice> (last visited January 12, 2013).

### About the Author

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