

## **Sentences: Avoid Zombie Abstractions**

Zombie abstractions are conceptual sentences that never touch real ground. Instead, good writers explain concepts with concrete nouns and active verbs:

*Example of “zombie” writing from a social science textbook:*

The partial participation of newcomers is by no means “disconnected” from the practice of interest. Furthermore, it is also a dynamic concept. In this sense, peripherality, when it is enabled, suggests an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement. The ambiguity inherent in peripheral participation must then be connected to issues of legitimacy, of the social organization of and control over resources, if it is to gain its full analytical potential.

*Revision:*

Most major scientific theories rebuff common sense. They call on evidence beyond the reach of our senses and overturn the observable world. They disturb assumed relationships and shift what has been substantial into metaphor. The earth now only seems immovable. Such major theories tax, affront, and exhilarate those who first encounter them, although in fifty years or so they will be taken for granted, part of the apparently common-sense set of beliefs which instructs us that the earth revolves around the sun whatever our eyes may suggest.

--“Darwin’s Plots,” by literary historian Gillian Beer

*Notice how this author explains abstract nouns, such as evidence and relationship, with the use of concrete nouns and action verbs—nouns: earth, sun, eyes; verbs: rebuff, overturn, exhilarate.*

Adapted from “Zombie Nouns,” by Helen Sword,  
<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns>