

Summary in English

Avoiding nominal forms. The validity and viability of a writing guideline.

This study poses the following question: to what extent does the advice to avoid nominal forms ('vermijd de naamwoordstijl'), given to novice writers in the Netherlands since 1969, help them to become more competent writers? While novice writers are routinely urged to avoid nominalizations, nominal compounds, verbonominal constructions and other nominal forms in their expository texts, there are several reasons to question the validity of this approach.

Firstly, Dutch style guides and writing textbooks offer disparate insights into the very characteristics of 'naamwoordstijl'. As a result, it is not entirely clear what it is that novice writers are meant to avoid. Secondly, while beginners are told to avoid nominal forms, texts written by more experienced writers do regularly contain them. This may lead novice writers to wonder why they are advised to eschew the use of nominal style in their own texts. There is thus good reason to suspect that novice writers will find the advice to avoid nominal forms both difficult to manage and unhelpful for the further development of their writing competence. Additionally, within the field a number of problems have been identified regarding the adequacy of writing advice and guidelines in general. It has especially been noted that Dutch writing textbooks fail to account for the interaction between style and different types of text. This could prove to be a problem for the development of novice writers' generic competence.

The Dutch concept of 'naamwoordstijl' is an instantiation of what is often referred to as nominal style. **Chapter 1** opens by putting it in an international context, exploring its place in the ongoing discussion of nominal versus verbal style in German, English and Dutch literature on stylistics. It is noted that nominal style is a comprehensive concept, spanning a wide spectrum of nominal forms and giving rise to a variety of opinions and assessments. The stylistic effects involved have led to the association of nominal style with several negative features. According to a great number of textbooks on style and rhetoric, the use of nominal forms will result in wordy, vague, impersonal, unclear, dense, and complex sentences. At times, a moral judgement can be detected as well. A notable exception is the impartial assessment offered by Halliday (1967), who argues that using nominal style is a valid option in sentence structure.

Chapter 1 goes on to reflect on the phenomenon of the writing guideline. It is argued that an effective writing guideline for novice writers must be designed along the lines of an 'expert model' (Cornelis, 2002), and display a superstructure with specific elements. These should include both conceptual elements, needed to provide the foundation for the guideline, and practical elements. Novice writers should be led to understand when and why they should avoid using nominal forms; they should also be given a clear characterization of nominal style,

which will enable them to recognize and ideally avoid incorrect use of features of nominal style in their own texts. Additional elements should inform writers how to eliminate unwanted nominal forms from their texts, as well as clarifying linguistic alternatives. It is suggested that this superstructure must allow for some variation in order to meet the demands of different types of text.

Having outlined the broader context of the concept of ‘naamwoordstijl’ as well as a general superstructure of a writing guideline, the true validity and viability of advising novice writers to avoid nominal forms can be properly explored. This dissertation approaches this issue from several different angles.

Chapter 2 uses a corpus of 44 Dutch textbooks on writing and rhetoric to analyse precisely how ‘naamwoordstijl’ is characterized, and how the claim that nominal forms are to be avoided is substantiated. A thorough analysis of all elements of the guidelines’ superstructure reveals that the label ‘naamwoordstijl’ in Dutch writing guides is indeed ill-defined and by no means unequivocal. Furthermore, this analysis shows that at various points the advice to avoid the use of nominal style is unbalanced, as the various elements of the superstructure do not form a coherent whole. In addition, there is very little evidence that Dutch writing guides attune their discussion of nominal forms to either the needs of different target groups of novice writers or the challenges of different types of text. For these reasons, the chapter argues that Dutch novice writers will indeed face a number of problems when trying to follow the advice regarding nominal forms that is offered to them.

Chapter 3 focuses on the origins of the writing guideline, mainly to explore how the problems discussed in chapter 2 arose. Why is ‘naamwoordstijl’ characterized in so many different ways? Why has such a variety of effects been attributed to nominal style, and why does the guideline suffer from such a lack of cohesion? In search of answers, this chapter examines the way the concept of ‘naamwoordstijl’ was introduced, in 1969, by language adviser Jan Veering. The picture that emerges shows that various developments in the field of language advice and language politics in the 1960s influenced the way the new concept of ‘naamwoordstijl’ was designed. It seems that Veering’s attempts to move away from purism and towards a new definition of appropriate style in particular led to the aforementioned problems in the demarcation of the concept ‘naamwoordstijl’. Another interesting factor is the growing influence of several new notions of appropriate style. In the Dutch tradition, the concept of appropriate style was defined either in terms of correctness or in terms of qualities such as appropriate tone or appropriate register. In the 1980s, most language advisers began interpreting appropriate style in terms of other qualities: ease of comprehension, clarity, attractiveness, and sometimes persuasiveness. They then tried to adjust their guidelines to fit this new framework. It is argued that it is this remodeling that caused the lack of internal cohesion identified in chapter 2.

Chapter 4 turns to the writing guideline's descriptive adequacy. It begins by re-examining the poor harmony between the advice to avoid nominal forms on the one hand, and the needs of different target groups of novice writers and/or the challenges of different types of text on the other. It is argued that this lack of harmony can also be attributed to the influence of the new definitions of appropriate style. Of course, the fact that the writing guideline seems to be poorly attuned to the needs of different target groups and different types of text will only be problematic if it turns out that experienced writers, when using nominal forms in different types of text, aimed at different target groups, do in fact take these differences into account. In the event that they do, the writing guideline in its present form will inevitably fail to assist novice writers in developing their writing competence to a (near) professional level. The chapter then explores studies of genre profiles of academic texts and health communication texts (leaflets, pamphlets) to determine the plausibility of divergent use of nominal forms in divergent types of texts. The findings certainly suggest that it is reasonable to assume on theoretical grounds that the use of nominal forms in academic texts and health communication texts will differ for genre-specific reasons.

On the basis of the observations and findings discussed in chapters 2 through 4, this chapter concludes by presenting the following research questions: (1) Do novice writers apply nominal forms more frequently than experienced writers? (2) Do novice writers and experienced writers use nominal forms differently? (3) Are there discrepancies between the way nominal forms are used in academic texts as opposed to health communication texts? (4) Do differences in the way novice writers and experienced writers make use of nominal forms justify the assumption that novice writers need to acquire specific genre-specific competences in regard to nominal forms? (5) Do differences in the use of nominal forms in texts by novice and experienced writers suggest that novice writers need additional advice on how to eliminate unwanted nominal forms from their texts, as well as on how to apply linguistic alternatives? These research questions form the basis for an empirical investigation into the ways novice and experienced writers use nominal forms in practice in academic texts and health communication texts. Chapters 5 and 6 report on the various results of this investigation.

Chapter 5 presents a corpus-based study of actual use of nominal forms by novice and experienced writers of academic texts and health communication texts. The chapter opens with a detailed discussion of the design of the study. The chapter then goes on to examine the results. First of all, they show a remarkable agreement in the actual use of nominal forms in academic texts and health communication texts by novice and experienced writers: in both genres, certain nominal forms, particularly those forms that are supposedly hard to process, are very rarely used. This raises an important question: should the guideline to avoid nominal forms, in the case of academic texts and health communication texts, extend to the use of all nominal forms that are included in the concept of 'naamwoordstijl'?

In addition, the results also show several differences in the actual use of nominal forms in both genres (regardless of writers' level of experience), thereby answering research question 3 in the affirmative. Interestingly, these differences are found in the use of specific nominal forms. Results show, moreover, that novice writers and experienced writers do indeed apply certain specific nominal forms differently, leading to an affirmative answer to question 2 as well. The results indicate an unexpected answer to research question 1: in both genres, novice writers do not use nominal forms with greater frequency than experienced writers do. Chapter 5 concludes with a provisional interpretation of all the results that come out of the study.

Chapter 6 offers a discussion of two qualitative analyses. Taken together, these analyses provide an initial answer to research questions 4 and 5. The chapter begins by analysing those nominal forms that could not be included in the quantitative study, as neither novice nor experienced writers used them with any regularity. The qualitative analysis shows some interesting details in the use of particular nominal forms, which seem to be attuned to the challenges of academic texts and health communication texts. Specifically, they involve divergent strategies in building and developing text. The differences in these strategies appear to result from specific characteristics of the genres of academic texts and health communication texts, but also at times seem to be related to differences in communicative aims that can in themselves be relevant to both genres. There is no indication of a significant difference between novice and experienced writers in the application of these strategies.

The second qualitative analysis focuses on a deeper understanding of the quantitative differences found in the corpus study. It focuses on nominal forms that, as they were applied differently in academic texts and health communication texts, seem to contribute to the genre profile of these texts and were also used differently by novice and experienced writers. This analysis shows that experienced writers make choices in the domain of verbal and nominal style that novice writers are not yet capable of making. Among these are, predominantly, strategies chosen when building and developing a text. As these strategies have been shown to be important to the genre profiles of academic versus health communication texts, it seems that novice writers of both genres still need to acquire specific generic competences with respect to the use of nominal forms (research question 4). The analysis furthermore brings to light some specific differences between the grammatical choices made by novice writers and experienced writers regarding specific nominal forms in specific contexts and the employment of linguistic alternatives. Interestingly, the analysis suggests that experienced writers are more skilled than novice writers in their application of techniques of nominalization. This indicates a need for additional advice to novice writers (research question 5).

Chapter 7 takes a balanced look at the multifaceted research presented in chapters 1 through 6. The chapter argues that there are serious problems with

respect to the validity and viability of the guideline to avoid nominal forms. It therefore proposes a restructuring of the concept of 'naamwoordstijl' into four separate categories of nominal forms. Not only would a restructuring of this kind promote the conceptual clarity of the writing guideline, it would also make it easier to align the guideline with the challenges inherent to individual genres by concentrating on those categories of nominal forms that are relevant and setting aside those nominal forms that are not. The chapter strongly recommends reconsidering the present framework of the guideline, with its emphasis on avoiding nominal forms for reasons of general stylistic demands regardless of genre. This emphasis is not only not in accordance with the actual use of nominal forms in at least two different genres, but also leads to a disregard of issues concerning grammatical choice within the domain of nominal and verbal style. Again, these issues appear to be more than relevant if novice writers are to be supported in their aim to become competent writers in different genres.

An overview of possible limitations and shortcomings of the present study that might hinder further generalization – specifically the limitations of the results obtained in chapters 5 and 6 – concludes both chapter 7 and the dissertation as a whole.