



Adjectives, Nouns, and Hyphens

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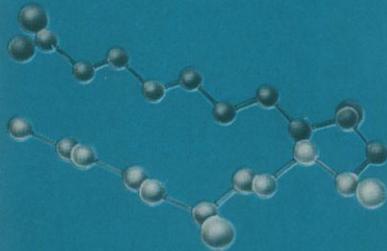
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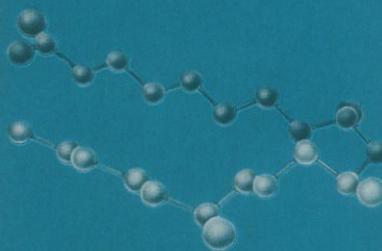
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tion of moldy food within the previous day or two. That T2 can contaminate food in the Asian tropics is indicated by reports from India of high levels in corn, sorghum, and safflower seed (7).

Although a more systematic investigation is needed, the available evidence strongly suggests that the yellow rain samples and the trichothecenes result from natural phenomena. Similar phenomena may have been responsible for the complaints brought by Cambodia before the United Nations Security Council 19 years ago alleging that U.S. and South Vietnamese planes were spraying lethal yellow powder over Cambodian villages (8). If the yellow rain is a natural phenomenon, there could nevertheless remain serious and possibly widespread human illness caused by trichothecenes.

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Adjectives, Nouns, and Hyphens

Reading Milton Hildebrand's recommendation against the "adjective noun use tendency" in the writing of biologists

(Letters, 19 Aug., p. 698), I remembered the copybook injunction against the use of nouns as adjectives. But I also remembered a day in Santo Domingo when, waiting for my host's car to be allowed past an accident scene, I spent a moment translating a movie marquee and discovered that the Dominicans could see "The Fever of the Night of Saturday." I decided then that my copybook injunction might well be discarded formally, as it had already been functionally, and I found myself glad that English allowed me the advantage of using nouns as adjectives.

I have considered Hildebrand's examples and find that I prefer "heart chamber pressure change" to "change in the pressure of the chamber of the heart," "sea snake diet data" to "data on the diet of the snake of the sea," "hair cell orientation pattern" to "pattern of orientation of the cells of hair," and "ankle joint angle measurement" to "measurement of the angle of the joint of the ankle." I prefer even more "heart-chamber pressure change," "sea-snake diet data," "hair-cell orientation pattern," and "ankle-joint angle measurement." True, "lizard ovary winter lipid level change" is poor writing, but again, "change in the level of the lipids of the ovaries of the lizard in winter" is not lucid either. But use of a hyphen and three noun adjectives yields "winter changes in lizard-ovary lipid levels," which seems clear, efficient, and unobtrusive.

In summary, noun adjectives are not the problem, logical juncturing is; and logical juncturing can in fact be facilitated by noun adjectives, especially when they are aided by hyphens. We used to have a rule about hyphens (which I have exemplified in this letter); it is not currently in vogue among style-rule-book writers. Hildebrand's problem would dissolve if science editors would ignore the current fashion in rules and attend instead to clarity, efficiency, and unobtrusiveness in science writing.

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Erratum: In R. Jeffrey Smith's News and Comment article "Antisatellite weapon sets dangerous course" (14 Oct., p. 140), a remark on page 141 (column 3) by Richard Garwin about the usefulness of rockets, balloons, and aircraft to supplant U.S. photoreconnaissance and meteorological satellites was inadvertently attributed to Robert Buchheim. And a characterization on page 141 (column 2) of the Soviet antisatellite weapon, or ASAT, was actually made by General Lewis Allen, the former Air Force chief of staff, not by General David Jones, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Finally, a footnote on page 142 should have identified the Patriot as an air-to-air missile, not an air-to-ground missile.