

bernstein on words



# Nouns 'verbed'

By Theodore M. Bernstein

Not a predominant adverb. A Columbus, Ohio, reader asks about the word predominately as in the term "predominately white" or "predominately black." She says her librarian tells her the library's dictionary lists no such word, nor, she says, does hers, but both list predominantly.

Actually, almost all dictionaries do include the word and it is not a latter-day development. The big Oxford English Dictionary traces it back as far as 1594, but labels it "rare." Today's dictionaries do not even give it that label, but it is true that predominantly is the predominant form.

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Should nouns be verbed? The answer, which was given here once before, is a restricted yes. The process of what in grammar is called "conversion" has been going on since the 13th century and in many instances has made the language more economical and more precise. It is crisper, for example, to say a man gardens than to say he tends a garden.

However, one that bothers Miss Phyllis G. Chew of Salem, N.J., and many other

people is "host," as in "he will host a party." Another is author, as in "she authored a romantic novel."

It is too late to prevent people from saying that Senator Blank chaired the meeting, although that coinage is only a couple of decades old. But let's hope the senator will never be allowed to motion adjournment.

The conversion of nouns into verbs is acceptable if it fills a need, but there is no need for mere novelty.

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Word oddities. Why the expression "by the same token;" why always a token and not a coin? asks Donald K. Fenstermacher of Collingswood, N.J.

A coin is a piece of metal used as money. A token sometimes is something similar, but more often is a thing that represents or indicates a fact, a happening, a feeling, etc.

By the same token means likewise or calls up the similarity to one of those things. In that sense it has nothing to do with a piece of metal.

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