

# NOMINALIZATION IN WOMEN'S INSTRUCTIVE TEXTS, 1700-1899. DIACHRONIC SHIFTS IN FORM AND FUNCTION\*

Elena Quintana-Toledo  
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the diachronic development of nominalization in women's instructive texts between 1700 and 1899, using evidence from the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English* (CoWITE). The study compares the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century subcorpora (CoWITE18, CoWITE19) to trace both quantitative changes in frequency and qualitative shifts in function. Findings show a steady increase in nominalization rates, from 11.1 to 15.2 per 10,000 words, accompanied by a morphological shift: while eighteenth-century texts relied heavily on native formations in *-ness* and *-ity*, nineteenth-century prose displays a marked preference for Latinate suffixes such as *-tion* and *-ment*. Functionally, nominalizations are used for procedural labelling, measurement and evaluation, impersonal expression, and abstraction. Their growing use supports a move toward higher lexical density and a more authoritative, impersonal style. In Hallidayan terms, this represents an increase in grammatical metaphor, aligning women's instructive prose with broader developments in Late Modern English toward informational density and professionalised writing.

**KEYWORDS:** Nominalization, Grammatical Metaphor, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Women's Writing, Late Modern English, Instructive Texts, Corpus Linguistics

## LA NOMINALIZACIÓN EN LA ESCRITURA INSTRUCTIVA FEMENINA (1700-1899): EVOLUCIÓN DIACRÓNICA SEGÚN FORMAS Y SUS FUNCIONES

## RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la evolución diacrónica de la nominalización en textos instructivos escritos por mujeres entre 1700 y 1899 a partir del corpus CoWITE. La comparación entre los subcorpus del siglo XVIII y XIX muestra un aumento sostenido en la frecuencia de nominalizaciones y un desplazamiento morfológico hacia sufijos latinos. Desde el punto de vista funcional, estas formas contribuyen a una mayor densidad léxica, impersonalidad y abstracción, reflejando una prosa instructiva progresivamente más autoritaria e institucionalizada dentro del inglés moderno tardío.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** nominalización, metáfora gramatical, lingüística sistémico-funcional, escritura femenina, inglés moderno tardío, textos instructivos, lingüística de corpus.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.92.01>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 92; abril 2026, pp. 31-46; ISSN: e-2530-8335  
[Licencia Creative Commons Reconocimiento-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional \(CC BY-NC-SA\)](#)



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nominalization, the process by which verbs, adjectives, or clauses are turned into nouns (e.g., *decide* → *decision*, *happy* → *happiness*), is a pervasive strategy in English writing, closely linked to abstraction, condensation of meaning, and the construction of authority (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). In historical texts, the presence and frequency of nominalizations offer insights into shifts in rhetorical practices, genre conventions, and extensive epistemological orientations. Women's instructive writing of the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries constitutes a particularly fertile ground for studying nominalization, as these texts negotiated the competing demands of authority, accessibility, and gendered expectations in domains such as cookery, domestic management, and medical advice (Beeton 1875; Acton 1882; Clarke 1886; Campbell 1893).

The Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English (CoWITE), with its two subcorpora covering the eighteenth (CoWITE18, ~541,789 tokens) and nineteenth centuries (CoWITE19, ~502,701 tokens), provides a representative dataset for examining how nominalization was mobilized diachronically in women's didactic discourse. Previous studies have shown that nominalization often correlates with increased textual density and impersonality in scientific and technical writing (Banks 2008; Halliday 2004). Yet, in women's instructive genres, where guidance must be both practical and persuasive, the use of nominalizations may serve additional interpersonal and rhetorical functions, such as projecting authority while avoiding overt prescriptiveness (Alonso-Almeida & Álvarez-Gil 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present paper seeks to investigate how nominalization operates in women's instructive texts across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The analysis focuses not only on quantitative shifts in frequency but also on the functional roles these forms play in constructing voice, authority, and reader alignment. To guide the study, the following research questions are posed:

1. What are the most frequent nominalization patterns in CoWITE18 and CoWITE19, and how do their distributions compare?
2. Do nominalization strategies change from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century in terms of form (e.g., suffixation patterns, zero-derivation) and frequency?
3. What rhetorical or interpersonal functions do nominalizations serve in women's instructive writing, and how might these functions evolve across the two centuries?
4. How does the use of nominalization in CoWITE reflect the negotiation of authority and expertise by women writers in contexts such as cookery, domestic management, and medical advice?

---

\* The research conducted in this paper has been supported by the Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Plan Estatal de Investigación Científica, Técnica y de Innovación 2021–2023, under award number PID2021-125928NB-I00. I hereby express my thanks. Unión Europea · Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional “Una manera de hacer Europa”.



The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical background, situating nominalization within systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and historical linguistics. Section 3 describes the corpus materials, annotation methods, and procedures used to identify nominalizations (with the aid of corpus tools). Section 4 presents the results, comparing quantitative distributions and functional categories across the two centuries. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings in relation to gender, authorship, and the evolution of instructive discourse. It also offers conclusions and directions for further research.

## 2. HISTORICAL-THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: NOMINALIZATION IN ENGLISH AND IN SFL

In English, *nominalization* broadly refers to the encoding of processes, properties, and relations as “things.” This can be achieved through derivation (*coagulate* → *coagulation*; *prepare* → *preparation*; *effective* → *effectiveness*), conversion or zero-derivation (*to mix* → *a mix*), *-ing* forms (*boiling*, *steeping* as nouns), and support-verb constructions (*make an infusion*; *take a decoction*) (Marchand 1969; Heyvaert 2003). Beyond morphology, nominalization reshapes clause structure: verbal predication yields to elaborated noun phrases, often heavily pre- or post-modified and accompanied by *of*-genitives. The effect is a compaction of information, heightened lexical density, and a greater capacity for reference and taxonomization (Biber & Gray 2010, 2016).

From a diachronic perspective, the rise of a nominal style has been linked to the consolidation of specialized prose, particularly in scientific and technical registers from the seventeenth century onwards (Atkinson 1999; Banks 2008). By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, expository prose in English shows a marked preference for phrasal elaboration (complex noun phrases) over clausal elaboration (subordination). This shift is often taken as a hallmark of academicization and procedural standardization (Biber & Gray 2016). In instructional genres such as, domestic economy guides, or medical directions, nominalizations regularly label procedures (*filtration*, *infusion*, *administration*), materials (*mixture*, *solution*), and results (*precipitate*, *sediment*). In doing so, they create portable labels for steps and outcomes, facilitating de-agentive or impersonal sequencing of instructions.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also saw the institutionalization of technical lexis and the stabilization of procedural genres. Studies of scientific and medical writing point to an increasing reliance on “thing-naming” over event-construing formulations, with derivational families in *-tion/-ment/-ance* proliferating, *of*-phrases expanding as classificatory resources, and light-verb frames objectifying processes (Banks 2008; Taavitsainen & Pahta 2011; Gotti 2003). These tendencies were not confined to elite journals: women’s manuals and recipe collections reveal a similar packaging of operations as standardized entities, promoting replicability, consistency, and an ethos of reliability for public consumption. Nominalization here intersects with other lexical classes, measurement nouns (*quantity*, *degree*, *proportion*),



container nouns (*vessel, receiver*), temporal nouns (*duration, interval*), to form a cohesive procedural lexicon.

For the women-authored instructive prose examined in this study (CoWITE 18/19), we therefore expect nominalizations to function as internal anchors: stabilising procedural steps, rendering outcomes callable by name, and supporting condensed thematic progression (*The infusion ... This preparation ... The application ...*). This feature enhances both skimmability and reusability across households and domains.

Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), nominalization is a prime type of experiential grammatical metaphor: a process or quality is re-grammaticized as a thing (Halliday & Martin 1993; Halliday & Matthiessen 1998, 2014). The shift redistributes meaning from the clause to the nominal group, enabling three consequences: higher lexical density; technicality through taxonomic layering; and information packaging that supports abstraction and cumulative knowledge-building. In this view, nominalization is not simply word formation; it is a re-construal of experience that reorganizes logical and textual relations in the service of expert communication.

SFL predicts three interlocking outcomes, all testable in historical corpora:

1. Thingification and taxonomy. Processes and qualities are objectified (*the filtration of the tincture; the administration of the dose*), enabling classification and chaining through *of*-phrases and premodifiers.
2. Clause compression and cohesion. Information otherwise expressed through subordination is packaged in nominal groups, promoting phrasal elaboration and tighter thematic progression across steps (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014; Biber & Gray 2016).
3. Interpersonal distance. Objectified wording supports impersonality, shifting directive force from agent to procedure or product. While primarily ideational, nominalization's interpersonal effects –authority, mitigation, institutional stance– are well documented in analyses of academic and educational discourse (Halliday & Martin 1993; Schleppegrell 2004).

In instructive writing, these functions gain special resonance. Nominalizations stage procedures (*decoction, clarification, reduction*); encode standards and measures (*proportion, concentration, consistency*); manage agency via light-verb frames (*make a solution; give an application*); and facilitate intertextuality, as labels travel easily across texts and communities of practice (Banks 2008; Gotti 2003). Taken together, they mark nominalization as both register-defining and genre-enabling. In the CoWITE subcorpora, we thus anticipate two patterns: (i) quantitative increase, more nominalizations in the nineteenth century and more complex noun-phrase structures; and (ii) functional specialization, with an expansion of *-tion* forms for process-naming, light-verb constructions, and “N-of-N” patterns for classification. Following SFL, we also expect correlations with textual organization (nominalized heads serving as step-wise Themes) and with interpersonal stance (greater impersonality and authority co-occurring with heavier nominal load). Framed by this historical-functional account, the study asks how nominalization differs across centuries in form,



frequency, and rhetorical function, and how women writers adapted it to organize procedures, calibrate directive force, and build technical taxonomies.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study is based entirely on the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English* (CoWITE), more precisely on its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century subcorpora (CoWITE18 and CoWITE19). Together, these contain editions of prose published between 1700-1799 and 1800-1899, all authored by British women. The genres are practical: household manuals, cookbooks, conduct books, recipe collections, and medical guides for domestic use. Keeping the analysis within CoWITE alone, rather than importing external material, ensures that comparisons are made in a controlled discourse space, where both genre and authorship remain consistent. Our approach is corpus-driven but interpretive. Data were explored with #LancsBox (Brezina, McEnery & Wattam 2015), which provides concordancing, frequency counts, and collocation analysis. The software was used to retrieve candidate nominalizations, to calculate their frequencies, and to trace recurrent patterns. At each stage, the quantitative output was read against concordance lines, so that statistics were continually checked against textual nuance.

The first task was to establish what to count as a nominalization. We drew up a list of productive suffixes, *-tion, -ment, -ness, -ity, -ancel-ence, -ship*, on the basis of their long-established role in English derivation. This ensured that words such as *instruction, advisement, kindness, curiosity, deliverance, or friendship* would all be included. Once the list was fixed, wildcard searches were run in LancsBox: for example, *\*tion* retrieved forms from the predictable (*instruction, preparation*) to the unusual (*coction*). Each result came with surrounding context and bibliographical metadata, which later allowed us to trace usage back to specific decades or works.

At this point, the output had to be checked manually. Some forms retrieved by the queries were not genuine nominalizations, either because the ending was misleading (*actual* under *-al*) or because the item was part of a proper noun. These were excluded, leaving us with two verified datasets, one for each century. This stage was time-consuming but essential, as it ensured that later counts rested on accurate evidence. From there, several kinds of quantitative analysis were carried out. First, we measured raw and normalized frequencies to test whether nominalizations became more common in the nineteenth century. We then compared the distribution of endings, asking, for instance, whether *-tion* forms were increasingly preferred to *-ness* forms. A further step was keyword analysis: by contrasting one century against the other as reference corpus, we identified words that were strikingly characteristic of each period. For example, nineteenth-century texts displayed a marked rise in terms such as *education* and *instruction*.

Collocational evidence provided another angle. Here the focus was on the company that frequent nominalizations kept, verbs like *give* or *make* with nouns such as *instruction* or *solution*, or adjectives like *useful* and *necessary* that framed evaluative stances. Mutual Information and log-likelihood measures were applied



to establish statistical strength, though concordance inspection always remained the final arbiter. Finally, the metadata allowed us to plot usage across decades, which revealed whether trends were gradual or whether they accelerated, for example, in the later Victorian period.

Throughout, the numbers were treated not as ends in themselves but as clues to style and history. A heavier load of *-tion* nouns, for instance, may suggest that women's instructional prose moved towards a more objectified and procedural register in the nineteenth century, echoing broader academicising tendencies of the age. Conversely, the persistence of *-ness* nouns might point to the survival of moral and qualitative framing, characteristic of earlier conduct traditions. All said, the methodology combined computational searches with careful manual review and interpretive reading. The balance of quantitative and qualitative stages was designed to reveal not only how often nominalisations appeared, but also what they were doing in context, whether anchoring procedures, signalling measures, or modulating authority in women's instructive writing across two centuries.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. FREQUENCY AND FORM

The numbers leave little doubt that nominalization became more common as the century turned. In the eighteenth-century subcorpus, CoWITE18 (about 541,789 words), I counted 603 instances, which works out at 11.1 per 10,000 words. The nineteenth-century set, CoWITE19 (502,701 words), contains 764, or 15.2 per 10,000. Put another way, the later texts show roughly one third more nominalizations than their predecessors. This rise is not an isolated quirk of women's writing but part of a wider tendency in Late Modern English. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prose shifted towards heavier noun-based phrasing, with finite verbs and subordinate clauses gradually giving way to compressed noun phrases. Biber and Gray (2016) describe the development in academic prose as a "compressed" style, where information is packed into dense nominal groups rather than strung out through verbal elaboration. The CoWITE material suggests that manuals, cookery books, and household medical guides written by women were following a similar path. Their nineteenth-century prose carries more nominalized expressions, which gives the writing a noticeably more compact and objectified feel.

The difference is modest in absolute terms, only a little over four tokens more per ten thousand words, but it is steady enough to matter. It tells us that by the Victorian period a set of instructions was increasingly phrased through named entities such as *the infusion* or *the preparation* instead of through verbs tied to an actor. The shift moves attention away from the person performing the action and towards the procedure itself. In doing so, it lends the text an air of authority, while also presenting the operation as something standardized and repeatable.



TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF NOMINALIZATION TYPES BY SUFFIX IN CoWITE18 AND CoWITE19 (PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL NOMINALIZATIONS PER SUBCORPUS).

SUFFIX	CoWITE18 (%)	CoWITE19 (%)
<i>-tion (-sion)</i>	17%	35%
<i>-ness</i>	31%	15%
<i>-ity</i>	35%	25%
<i>-ment</i>	11%	11%
<i>-ing</i> (nominal gerund)	<1%	<1%
Zero-derivation	<1%	<1%

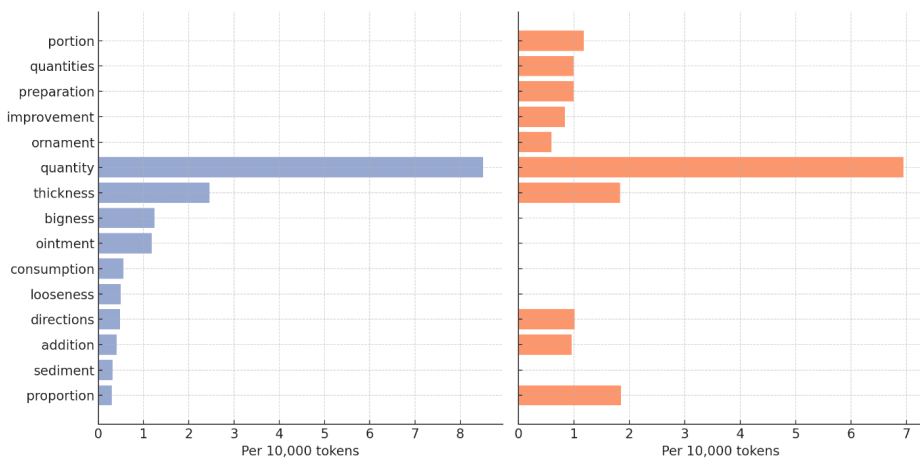
Note: Percentages are rounded. “Zero-derivation” refers to nominal uses of a verb or adjective with no affix (conversion). Plural forms are counted with their base suffix category.

When we look closely at suffixal patterns, both centuries draw on the same broad set of derivational tools, but their balance is far from identical. In CoWITE18 the bulk of tokens fall under *-ity* and *-ness*. Together they make up more than half of all nominalizations. The heavy use of *-ness* says much about the rhetoric of eighteenth-century recipes. Authors constantly describe qualities that can be scaled up or down: *the thickness of cream, the bigness of a walnut*. The native suffix fits this need perfectly, and words such as *goodness* or *looseness* appear again and again in the corpus. The nineteenth-century material tells another story. Here *-tion* nouns push to the fore, climbing from about one sixth of the earlier total to well over a third. Many are recognisably Latinate, e.g., *instruction, observation, proportion*, and their spread suggests a stronger taste for abstraction and formality. A recipe that once gave plain advice now states “a small proportion of saltpetre”. Whole sections open under headings like “Observations on...”, a practice hardly found in eighteenth-century manuals. In contrast, *-ness* forms shrink to around fifteen per cent, and familiar items such as *bigness* vanish altogether. *-ity* nouns remain frequent, but the count in the earlier period is inflated by the almost formulaic use of *quantity* in expressions like “a quantity of...”. By the nineteenth century this dominance has eased, and terms such as *portion* and *proportion* share the load.

The picture for *-ment* is stable in numbers, roughly ten to eleven per cent in both centuries, but not in character. In the earlier texts *ointment* is ubiquitous and concrete. In the later century we encounter more abstract uses: *improvement* of a recipe, *management* of a household. This change is small, yet it alters the flavour of the prose. Gerundial *-ing* nouns are strikingly rare. Academic prose of the same period often uses them, *the building of a bridge, the making of a law*, but instructive writing does not. These authors prefer the imperative. They tell the reader to *boil the pudding* rather than to talk about *the boiling of the pudding*. One fixed compound, *falling-sickness*, survives in an eighteenth-century medical recipe, but here *falling* functions as part of a set label rather than as an active pattern.

Zero-derivation hardly features. Words such as *use* or *cure* could in theory act as conversion nouns, but the corpus shows that writers avoided them. Instead,





Graph 1. Top ten nominalizations in CoWITE18 and CoWITE19  
(normalized per 10,000 tokens)

they relied on overt suffixes to mark nominalisation clearly, which likely gave the prose greater formality and reduced ambiguity. Modern English, by contrast, makes frequent use of conversion. What emerges is a gradual shift in style: from the native, sometimes homely feel of *-ness* and similar forms to a preference for Latinate, more abstract endings. The nineteenth-century texts adopt a denser and more objectified style, one that aligns more closely with the scientific and technical registers of the time. The lexical profile of the most frequent items, illustrated in Graph 1, underlines this development.

In sum, both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers in CoWITE rely heavily on nominalization, yet the later century shows a higher rate and a preference for different morphological shapes. Some needs remain constant: writers in both periods turn to nominal forms when they need to measure, to name qualities, or to label procedures. What shifts is the choice of form. By the nineteenth century, the balance tilts towards Latinate and more abstract endings such as *-tion* and *-ment*, while the older native suffixes like *-ness* decline. This development fits the larger stylistic trajectory of formal English in the period, which moved steadily towards a more abstract and noun-heavy style. Banks (2008) had already noted that scientific prose, long reliant on nominalization, intensified this tendency in the nineteenth century. The CoWITE figures confirm that women's instructive writing was part of the same current. The increase from 11.1 tokens per ten thousand words in CoWITE18 to 15.2 in CoWITE19 matches the broader rise in informational density and phrasal compression described by Biber and Gray (2016). Put plainly, women authors who were often excluded from the recognized scientific sphere were nonetheless adopting the nominal style of late modern prose. Doing so lent their instructions a tone of impersonality and authority, preparing the ground for the rhetorical strategies discussed in the following section.



## 4.2. FUNCTIONS IN CONTEXT

Beyond raw counts, it matters how nominalizations work in practice. Close reading of concordance lines in CoWITE18 and CoWITE19 shows that they are used for a set of recurrent purposes. The same core functions appear in both centuries, though nineteenth-century writers sometimes use them more elaborately, for example, in framing commentary on their own text. Four functions stand out: (a) procedural labelling, (b) measurement and evaluation, (c) impersonal expression, and (d) abstraction and generalization. These often overlap, but for clarity they are treated separately, with examples drawn from the corpus in their original spelling.

### (a) *Procedural labelling.*

Nominalizations often appear as labels that mark steps or sections of a procedure. Words such as *observation(s)*, *direction(s)*, *preparation*, or *caution* signal to the reader that what follows is not an imperative step but a block of general advice or framing comment. In Mary Randolph's *Virginia Housewife* (1824), we find:

- (1) General observations on roasting. Mutton is in season all the year round, but is best from October to Christmas. [...] (Randolph 1824)

Here *observations* works as a section heading, grouping together remarks on a practice before the instructions begin. Eighteenth-century texts behave in much the same way. One recipe, after listing ingredients, introduces the procedure with "The Directions how to take all." In both cases the verb is turned into a noun that names a resource: not "observe" but "observations," not "direct" but "directions." The effect is to create the feel of a structured manual rather than a personal note. Readers can also scan for these headings, which makes navigation easier in long compilations. Halliday's account of grammatical metaphor is relevant here: processes are re-packaged as entities that can be handled as units of discourse. The practice continues into the nineteenth century, with a touch more formality. Writers now add specifying adjuncts, *Observations on Roasting*, which makes the labels more precise and a little closer in tone to formal treatises.

### (b) *Measurement and evaluation.*

A large proportion of nominalizations describe quantities, consistencies, or results. Instead of adjectives or clauses, authors rely on abstract nouns to pin down measurable properties. Fitzgerald's recipe from 1703 offers a good illustration:

- (2) *Stirre it continually, till it come to the thickness of creame or some thing thicker* (Fitzgerald 1703)



The noun *thickness* condenses a comparative description into a single word, linked by *of* to a standard measure. Similarly, *bigness* frequently appears in the eighteenth-century corpus, *the bigness of a walnut* is a stock way of specifying size. Such phrasing makes the property a unit in itself, something to be recognized by the reader.

Nineteenth-century texts retain this habit but add evaluative nouns such as *improvement*, *success*, *failure*, and *perfection*. Isabella Beeton (1861) comments:

- (3) Onions roasted, and then stewed with the gravy are a great improvement [to the dish]. (Beeton 1861)

Here *improvement* is not an action but a result. It names the positive effect of a technique in a way that feels factual rather than personal. This capacity to package both measurement and evaluation in a compact noun phrase is one reason nominalization is so effective in instructive prose. It allows writers to move between describing amounts (*a quantity of spirit*) and passing judgment (*the goodness of the meat*) without changing syntactic frame. The function is stable across the two centuries, though later texts tend to draw on a wider range of evaluative nouns and embed them in more complex noun phrases.

(c) *Impersonality and objectivity.*

Nominalization also supports an impersonal tone. Instead of “you must be cautious,” Anne Corbet (1835) writes:

- (4) [...] a great deal of Nicety and particular Caution is to be used in roasting the various Sorts of wild Fowl [...] (Corbet 1835)

The requirement is expressed through the noun *caution*, framed by a passive construction. No human agent is mentioned. The instruction appears not as advice from the author but as an abstract condition of the task. Later texts extend this tendency. An 1890 manual states: “the removal of stains should be effected quickly.” The noun *removal* again suppresses the actor, leaving the procedure itself as the focus. This pattern resonates with the wider stylistic drift in nineteenth-century English towards informational density and impersonality. It also complicates the stereotype that women’s writing was necessarily more involved or personal. In these genres, women adopted the impersonal register confidently, using nominalizations to present instructions as objective requirements rather than personal directives.

(d) *Abstraction and generalization.*

Finally, nominalization permits writers to step back from specific tasks and talk about wider principles. Educational and conduct texts make this especially



clear. An 1841 guide refers to “the effect on the morals and habits of the poor of a neglected education.” Here *education* is not an act but a social condition. Later works speak of *self-improvement* or *the cultivation of habits*, treating processes as objects that can be analysed, encouraged, or criticized. Even simple nouns such as *knowledge* or *virtue* serve the same function, encapsulating states or qualities in a way that allows them to be measured and discussed. This function also carries ideological weight. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a push to formalize domestic science, pedagogy, and moral education. Women writers aligned their voice with that movement by phrasing their guidance in universal terms. A conduct manual might claim, “the happiness of a well-regulated family is secured by proper education.” Here *happiness* and *education* are presented as abstract entities, giving the statement the ring of a maxim rather than a personal opinion.

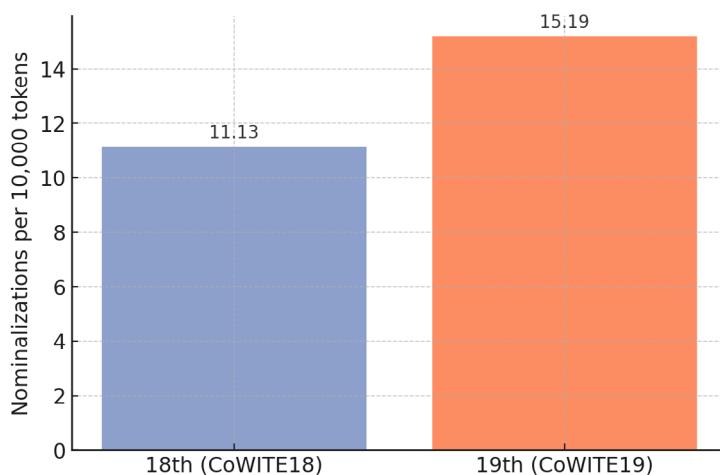
The corpus shows that nominalization in women’s instructive writing is not incidental. It is a tool for organising sections, conveying measures and judgments, adopting an impersonal tone, and formulating general principles. The rise in frequency across centuries corresponds to more frequent deployment of these functions, especially in nineteenth-century texts where authors also use nominal labels such as *observations* or *remarks* to manage text organization. The continuity is equally striking: across both centuries, nominalization allowed women to recast practical know-how as codified knowledge, presented with precision and authority.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The rise in nominalization frequency from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century in CoWITE signals a shift toward what Halliday describes as grammatical metaphor (see Graph 2). Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, nominalization, the rephrasing of processes and qualities as nouns, is regarded as the central resource for ideational metaphor. It allows meanings that are congruently expressed as actions or properties to be recast as entities. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) go so far as to call it “the single most powerful resource for creating grammatical metaphor,” since it underpins the technical vocabulary and dense exposition characteristic of specialized writing. When a process or quality is recast as a noun, it is treated as if it were an entity. This move allows writers to compress information and even turn a whole sequence of actions into a single nominal unit that can function as the Theme of a new clause. Historically, this capability was crucial for the development of scientific prose, since it made possible the construction of theoretical argumentation. The CoWITE material shows that women authors of instructive texts were also moving in this direction. Their prose increasingly re-presents experience through noun-based expressions, a choice that lends their instructions a more abstract and objectified character.

The numerical evidence is modest but telling. In CoWITE18 the rate is 11.13 nominalizations per ten thousand words; in CoWITE19 it rises to 15.19. The increase points to a genuine uptick in grammatical metaphor, with nineteenth-century instructive writing more likely to rely on nominal forms to encapsulate





Graph 2. Normalized frequency of nominalizations per 10,000 tokens in CoWITE18 and CoWITE19.

knowledge. Put simply, everyday activities and properties, once described in verbal clauses, were now more often reframed as stable concepts. This development aligns women's prose with the wider stylistic changes of Late Modern English, where noun-based construals came to dominate formal registers.

The nineteenth century does not just record a greater number of nominalizations. What is striking is the increasing complexity of the noun groups that bear them. As the form increases in number, it appears within long groups packed with qualifiers both before and after the head. Halliday noted that scholarly writing, once sophisticated, has a tendency to pack increasing amounts of information into such groups until an individual phrase becomes as complex as an entire clause (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). It is simple to contrast. An eighteenth-century writer may use simple language and say something like "we observe the child's behaviour changes over time." A latter-day writer may favour "the gradual observation of behavioural change through time." Here the process *observe* has become the noun *observation* with the possibility of extension through adjectives and *of*-phrases. What used to be an action has become an object, something measurable and comparable and insertable into a taxonomy.

Instances from CoWITE illustrate the point. Nominal forms are utilized to label steps or bundle assessments: application of remedy, efficacy of method. Both centuries demonstrate the practice, yet the nineteenth yields more of it and longer and more compact noun groups. Functionally, the discourse shifts more toward the nominal manner of meaning. Relations and action that once may have been unpacked over clauses are condensed into a single information-bearing unit. The result is higher lexical density and a style more abstract and aloof. Morphology has the same story to tell. Later texts deploy increasing numbers of those *-tion* words,



e.g., *instruction*, *observation*, *evaluation*, while *-ness* words such as *usefulness*, *firmness*, or *kindness* become less common. The preference makes a difference. The form *-ness* tends as a rule to form nouns from adjectives, specifying attributes, often of an evaluative kind. *-tion* and its allies *-ment* and *-ity* derive from verbs and write processes or products. And they carry the distinction of Latinate form. The tendency towards *-tion* suggests a conscious effort at attaching procedures and products with a certain technicality. Absence of *-ness* suggests a drift away from specifying moral or personal qualities. In short, the prose returns from “what something feels like” towards “what is being done or made.”

This trajectory is not unique to women’s writing. Broader studies of Late Modern English (Biber & Gray 2016; Biber & Conrad 2009) chart the same movement, away from clauses and towards dense noun phrases. Nominalization is central to that process. The stylistic difference can be seen if we set two sentences side by side. Around 1780 a recipe might read, “If you apply this treatment, the patient will improve in health.” A century later one finds, “The application of this treatment results in a marked improvement in the patient’s health.” Both condition and outcome have been nominalized, and the sentence now carries more information in compressed form.

What are the repercussions of this for the genre as a whole? What it implies is that women’s teaching writing was not peripheral at all but deeply involved with the broader professionalization of prose. Domestic books and cookbooks no longer went with a conversational style by the nineteenth century. They were books of reference: compact, descriptive, and impersonal. Continued use of words like *instruction*, *observation*, *development*, or *measure* betrays a style from which authority flows through abstraction. The rise of nominalization cannot thus simply be a quantitative one. It betrays a conscious choice of grammar. These texts are moving towards the metaphorical, noun-bound register with which Halliday identifies expert writing. What we end up with are texts that are lexically richer, more abstract and more overtly of nineteenth-century English’s informational registers.

One thing that strikes me in these results is the way genre and gender meet. CoWITE brings together texts by women, and that fact cannot be separated from the way style developed. Women’s access to public, knowledge-oriented writing was limited, yet the corpus shows them using a device, i.e., nominalization, that makes their prose sound more detached, even authoritative. To my mind, this was not just style drifting over time but a deliberate move. Nominal forms give information without tying it to a visible speaker. That impersonal quality mattered for women who needed to sound credible in domains still shaped by male authority. We need to remember the prejudice of the age. Late Modern commentators, almost always men, wrote again and again that women’s prose was sentimental or decorative, good for letters perhaps but not for instruction. The charge was that women could not write in a logical or detached style. Yet the actual texts disprove it. Read them and you find plenty of nominalizations, plenty of impersonal phrasing. In other words, women were working within the same informational style as men. Bello Viruega’s (2021) work on female scientists makes the same point: they too leaned on nominal forms to build the voice of expertise.



It seems to me that women had more at stake in this than men did. By avoiding “I” or “you” and phrasing advice in nominal terms, they could step around the suspicion that came with a woman giving orders. The difference is clear if we put two phrasings side by side. “I recommend you cleanse the wound thoroughly” has a voice; “thorough cleansing of the wound is recommended” does not. The second version sounds like fact, not opinion. This kind of move was surely important in fields like medicine or education, where women’s authority was not taken for granted. Of course genre conventions mattered as well. Instructional writing aims to guide. It works best when it sounds firm and systematic. Nominalization helps: “during the fermentation of the beverage,” “on examination of the results,” “the importance of ventilation.” These are compact ways of packaging information. Both centuries use them, but the nineteenth century multiplies them and often makes the noun groups longer, with more modifiers. The result is a denser and more professional tone.

The wider social setting cannot be ignored. By the nineteenth century women were slowly gaining ground in education and print culture, if still at the margins. Stylistic change in their prose may reflect exposure to new models of writing, many of them male. By aligning with the impersonal style of science and technical registers, they positioned themselves inside the culture of expertise. Nominalization, in that sense, worked as a tool of self-legitimation. The general trend in English prose goes in the same direction. Across the nineteenth century impersonality and objectivity were prized. Nominalization serves those values neatly. A sentence such as “the removal of rust is essential for maintenance” makes the process itself the subject. Who removes the rust is not the point. Scholars have long noted the general depersonalization of nineteenth-century prose, with its reliance on passives and nominal forms. CoWITE shows that women’s texts were part of this same shift.

All this changes the authorial persona. In the eighteenth century, a woman might still write as a friendly adviser, even a motherly figure. By the nineteenth, the voice is more institutional, less personal. Nominalization contributes directly to that move, presenting information as if it were fact. Readers, too, adjusted to the style. A text with a high rate of nominal forms sounded serious, and seriousness was tied to authority. The rhetorical functions are worth recalling: headings, as in “the preparation of the solution”; evaluative nouns, as in “a marked improvement”; abstractions, as in “the progress of civilisation.” Each became more visible in the later material. The texts do not just say what to do; they begin to explain why and under what principles.

What all this shows, really, is that a feature as technical as the rise of *-tion* or *-ment* nouns points us to something larger. Women were moving from a spoken-like discourse to a more written, metaphorical register, in Halliday’s sense. That move let them condense meanings, build arguments, and above all sound like authorities. The form carried social weight. Impersonality and expertise were encoded in grammar itself, and women used that resource to enter discursive spaces where authority had long been gendered as male.

Reviews sent to the authors: 14/11/2025

Revised paper accepted for publication: 30/01/2026



## WORKS CITED

- ACTON, Eliza. 1882. *Modern Cookery for Private Families*. Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer.
- ALONSO-ALMEIDA, Francisco, & Francisco J. ÁLVAREZ-GIL. 2021. "Impoliteness in Women's Specialized Writing in Seventeenth-Century English." *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 22(1): 121-142. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jhp.20004.alo>.
- ALONSO-ALMEIDA, Francisco, Francisco J. ÁLVAREZ-GIL, Ivalla ORTEGA-BARRERA, Elena QUINTANA-TOLEDO, Magdalena BATOR, Isabel DE LA CRUZ CABANILLAS, Margarita Esther SÁNCHEZ-CUERVO, & María José GÓMEZ. 2025. *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English (1800-1899) (CoWITE19)*. U Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15097949>.
- ALONSO-ALMEIDA, Francisco Jesús, Francisco J. ÁLVAREZ-GIL, & Ivalla ORTEGA-BARRERA. 2025. *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English (1700-1799) (CoWITE18)*. U Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15151249>.
- ATKINSON, Dwight. 1999. *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context: The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 1675-1975*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- BANKS, David. 2008. *The Development of Scientific Writing: Linguistic Features and Historical Context*. Equinox.
- BEETON, Isabella. 1875. *The Book of Household Management*. S. O. Beeton.
- BELLO VIRUEGA, Iria. 2021. "Nominalizations and Female Scientific Writing in the Late Modern Period." *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 72: 35-51.
- BIBER, Douglas, & Bethany GRAY. 2010. "Challenging Stereotypes about Academic Writing: Complexity, Elaboration, Explicitness." *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 9(1): 2-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2010.01.001>.
- BIBER, Douglas, & Bethany GRAY. 2016. *Grammatical Complexity in Academic English: Linguistic Change in Writing*. Cambridge UP. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511920776>.
- BIBER, Douglas, & Susan CONRAD. 2009. *Register, Genre, and Style*. Cambridge UP.
- BREZINA, Vaclav, Tony McENERY, & Stephen WATTAM. 2015. "Collocations in context: A new perspective on collocation networks". *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 20(2): 139-173.
- CAMPBELL, Helen. 1893. *The Easiest Way in Housekeeping and Cooking*. Roberts Brothers.
- CLARKE, Mrs. Charles. 1886. *High-Class Cookery Recipes, as Taught in the School*. W. H. Allen.
- GOTTI, Maurizio. 2003. *Specialized Discourse: Linguistic Features and Changing Conventions*. Peter Lang.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. 1988. "Grammar and Scientific Discourse: The Language of the Lexis." In *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power*, ed. M.A.K. Halliday & J.R. Martin, 136-158. U of Pittsburgh P.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. 2004. *The Language of Science*. Continuum.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K., & Christian M.I.M. MATTHIESSEN. 1998. "Things and Relations: Regrammaticising Experience as Grammatical Metaphor." In *Reading Science: Critical and Functional Perspectives on Discourses of Science*, ed. J.R. Martin & Robert Veal, 185-235. Routledge.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K., & Christian M.I.M. MATTHIESSEN. 2014. *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 4th ed. Routledge.



- HALLIDAY, M.A.K., & J.R. MARTIN. 1993. *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power*. Falmer Press.
- HEYVAERT, Liesbet. 2003. *A Cognitive-Functional Approach to Nominalization in English*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- MARCHAND, Hans. 1969. *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation*. 2nd ed. Beck.
- SCHLEPPEGRELL, Mary J. 2004. *The Language of Schooling: A Functional Linguistics Perspective*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- TAAVITSAINEN, Irma, & Päivi PAHTA, eds. 2011. *Medical Writing in Early Modern English*. Cambridge UP.

