Quick Editing Tips for Technical Writers

Tuesday, April 30, 2013

Presented by:
Rachel Spencer Thompson, Communications Specialist
So what is technical writing?

• A style of formal writing used in diverse scientific and technical fields that explains technology and related ideas to technical and non-technical audiences

• Writing about a technical subject matter in a clear, concise and understandable way that is appropriate for a specific audience

• The presentation of information that helps the reader solve a particular problem
Technical Writing: Fit for Purpose

- The end product is specific and focused to inform and influence its intended audience
- The manner of delivery adapts to the reader’s needs, level of understanding and background
- In fact, this audience element is so important that it is one of the cornerstones of technical communications
The message must be clear

• For technical documents to be useful, readers must understand and act on them without having to decode wordy and ambiguous prose

• Good technical writing
  • Clarifies technical jargon
  • Presents useful information that is clear and easy to understand by its intended audience
Making it clear can be a challenge

- Poor technical writing
  - Creates unnecessary technical jargon
  - Sows seeds of confusion and misunderstanding in readers’ minds

- Technical writers are needed to span the chasm between the scientist/ engineer/technician and the average user of their design or products
Results of Good Technical Writing

• Makes a good impression when flipped through
• Contains necessary front matter to disclose purpose and scope
• Provides essential information that is clearly written and is free of jargon or padding
• Uses tables and graphics, as necessary, to present and clarify content
• Contains a summary or conclusions, as necessary, to reveal the results obtained
• Is designed to be read selectively by readers with diverse interests or needs
• Uses a rational, readily discernible plan, revealed by the table of contents and by headings
• Reads coherently and cumulatively from beginning to end
• Answers readers' questions as their questions arise
• Conveys an overall impression of authority, thoroughness, soundness, and honest work
Form: embodies the format and the mechanics of the writing

format
  typography
  layout

mechanics
  grammar
  usage
  punctuation
  spelling
Begin with the Format

• An improved visual product that looks neat and clean automatically gives the reader a more positive impression
• Start cleaning up the document by making font styles, headings, paragraph spacing and justification, etc. consistent throughout
• In Word, create headings using the Styles or Outline function to automatically generate a table of contents
Begin with the Format (continued)

• Use the References function in Word to caption figures, tables, etc.; these may also be generated in addition to the table of contents
• Beginning with the format helps ensure that the document is visually-pleasing in case the originator needs it returned before the deadline or finished edits
• **ALWAYS RUN A SPELL CHECK** before returning a document to the originator!
The Mechanics

1. Apply the Rules of Good Writing
2. Edit Using Effective Technical Writing Tips
3. Review Your Work
Apply the Rules of Good Writing

• Sentence Construction
  • A paragraph should contain at least two clean sentences
  • Include only one to two ideas in each sentence
  • Vary sentence patterns
  • Avoid run-on sentences – use the “Fog Index” (see handout)
    • Class exercise using the Fog Index:
      • Take a long run-on sentence
      • Do a Fog Index
      • Break up the sentence
      • Then re-read and clarify
  • Alternately, prevent “choppy” sentences; the ideas should flow
    • Avoid: See Jane. See Jane run. See Jane run with the ball.
    • Better: See Jane run with the ball.
  • Determine when to use Bullets vs. long lists within the prose
Rules of Good Writing (continued)

• Keep the subject references together:
  • Avoid: The new well pad (I-Pad), consisting of 14 producers and 38 water injectors where development drilling will take place, shall be constructed in the northwest corner of the Greater Prudhoe Bay Unit area to access the Orion, EWE and Borealis reservoirs. (FI=13)
  • Better: The new well pad (I-Pad) will be constructed in the northwest corner of the Greater Prudhoe Bay Unit area to access the Orion, EWE, and Borealis reservoirs. (FI=9.5) The development drilling at I-Pad consists of 14 producers and 38 water injectors. (FI=11.8)

• Use characters appropriately
  • This especially applies to the ampersand (“&”) character:
    • Avoid: The boys met at the park to attend the dog & puppet shows.
    • Better: The boys met at the park to attend the dog and puppet shows.
  • Correct character usage: Strunk & White; Shell and Tube (S&T)
Rules of Good Writing (continued)

• Keep words specific and concrete; the more abstract a word or phrase, the less people will understand exactly what is meant
  • Vague or abstract words leave unanswered questions such as *What kind? How much? Which one? In what way?*
    • Abstract: The company’s sales picture is *gloomy* this year.
    • Concrete: The 25 percent drop in sales means we will probably not meet our objectives this year.
• Avoid using formal, official sounding statements, and use direct statements instead:
  • Avoid: Please refrain from discarding litter items on the company grounds or buildings. Use the litter receptacles placed throughout the plant for such purposes. Your cooperation is appreciated in this matter.
  • Better: Please deposit all waste paper, aluminum cans, bottles, and other trash in the appropriate litter containers. Help keep your grounds and buildings clean! We appreciate your cooperation.
Effective Technical Writing Tips

• Always spell out acronyms the first time they are used, followed by the acronym in parentheses
  • Examples: Greater Prudhoe Bay (GPB); Point Thomson Unit (PTU)
  • Develop a specific section in the document for definitions, terms or other abbreviations (“glossary”)
• Minimize the use of acronyms in a paragraph and on the page
• Ditto for using a word multiple times in a paragraph/page
• Use the Thesaurus to find alternative words that may fit
• No orphans
  • Keep headings with following text
  • No paragraph should have a dangling line on the following page
Effective Technical Writing Tips, continued

• Be consistent!
  • Follow the format style and organization in the template you are using
    • Headings, paragraphs, numbering, and bullet styles
    • When copying from one document to another, re-organize and apply the appropriate style to the text copied in
  • Be consistent with abbreviations, use of numbers, etc.
    • For example, if using periods in acronyms, consistently use periods in each acronym; or, if omitting, consistently omit periods in acronyms
    • Number examples: 10 sq. ft. or 10 sq ft; 6 feet 2 inches, or 6’ 2”
  • Be consistent with usage of upper and lower case letters
    • Examples: Well Pad, wellpad, Well pad
Effective Technical Writing Tips, continued

• Be clear! Choose the best words to describe your ideas in the best manner possible.
  • Keep words fresh; minimize the use of jargon, buzzwords, and clichés
    • Buzzword users prefer big vague words, such as: "utilize" rather than "use," "implement" rather than "do," "facilitate" rather than "do" or "make possible" or "make easy"

• Use an analogy to help the reader better visualize and understand complex concepts (“paint the picture”)
Effective Technical Writing Tips (continued)

• Use brevity! William Strunk (“The Elements of Style”) lived by his adage, “Omit needless words!”
  • Avoid the use of “there is” and “there are”
  • Condense clauses beginning with “which”, “that”, or “who” into fewer words
  • Strike out the article “the” wherever possible
  • Eliminate wordy or redundant phrases or expressions wherever possible
• Being brief does not mean that one should be cryptic; make your sentence clear and readable
Review Your Work

• Make sure your work is neat, accurate, and readable
  • Ensure consistency of font size, organization style, etc.
  • Check figures, dates, specifications, and other details
  • Be sure that all names, titles, abbreviations are spelled out properly
  • Verify the accuracy of references or direct quotations
  • Make sure your ideas are presented clearly
  • Make sure your work is organized in a logical manner for readers to follow
• Try to think like your audience, and re-read it again
  • Tip: Read the text aloud - it will help!
• Finally, have a native speaker check your document for clarity and readability
Review Your Work (continued)

• Check your spelling!
  • Top Ten Most Common Typos in America Today*
    10. Subject-verb disagreement: *Lemons sure is tasty.*
    9. That place where you go to eat: *Restaraunt, restauraunt*
    8. The double-letter fumble: *They're shiping dinning room furniture.*
    7. The A-for-E sabotage: *America loves its independance.*
    6. The confusion of tasty treats and arid sands: *Try our homemade deserts.*
    5. The misplaced apostrophe: *Womens' secret society.*
    4. The wrong "your" or "you're": *Your the best at you're job.*
    3. The wrong "its" or "it's": *Its in a class of it's own.*
    2. The missing apostrophe: *Mens fashions*
    1. The unnecessary apostrophe: *We sell hundreds of car's!*

* Taken from “The Great Typo Hunt -- Two Friends Correct Grammar Across the USA”, by *Wendy Rose Gould*, published on AOL.com, August 10, 2010
Review Your Work (continued)

• Correcting the Ten Most Common Typos
  10. Lemons sure are tasty.
  9. Restaurant
  8. They're shipping dining room furniture.
  7. America loves its independence.
  6. Try our homemade desserts.
  5. Women’s secret society.
  4. You’re the best at your job.
  3. It’s in a class of its own.
  2. Men’s fashions
  1. We sell hundreds of cars!
For Your Library


- The Fog Index (online; a copy is provided for the class)
Acknowledgements

- Michael Alley, author:
  - *Writing Guidelines for Students* ([http://writing.eng/vt.edu](http://writing.eng/vt.edu))

- Dennis G. Jerz, Technical Writer
  (jerz.setonhill.edut/resources/FAQ/ TW.htm) - a good source, although it hasn’t been updated recently

Other Resources

- [www.gatlineducation.com/technical_writing_course.html](http://www.gatlineducation.com/technical_writing_course.html) - certification online course offering Resource 1
- *A Complete Idiot’s Guide to Technical Writing*, by Krista Van Lan, Catherine Julian and JoAnn Hackos (Amazon.com)