Principles of Technical Communication

Created for Professor Vicki V. Peake
Basic Principles

- Make people the subjects of your sentences.
- Put action in the verbs.
- Use active voice when possible.
- Keep the actor and the action close together.
- Emphasize the important information in your sentences.
- Tie your sentences together.
More Basic Principles

 Use specific and unambiguous language.
 Use only the words your readers need.
 Use simple words.
 Use positive, inoffensive, nonsexist language.
 Use consistent and appropriate technical terminology.
 Consider your readers’ cultures and languages.
Make people your subjects.

When you put the actor outside your subject
- you create indirect, hard-to-read sentences
- your readers have to search for the subject
- you introduce passive voice
When a person is not your subject
Along with increased managerial problems, there are other problems the users encounter in their day-to-day activities.

When a person is your subject
The users encountered increased managerial problems and more in their day-to-day activities.
Put action in your verbs and use active voice.

Avoid nominalizations. When you put the action in nouns, you create wordy, awkward sentences. Put the action in the verb.

Use active, not passive voice. When you use active voice, your sentences generally have fewer words and are more direct. Avoid passive voice when you can.
Sometimes you will need to use passive voice. Use passive voice when

- the focus is on the **object** rather than the **subject**
- you do not know who is doing the action
- you need to follow the old/new pattern
Keep the actor and the action close together.

If several words or phrases separate the subject from the verb, readers may have to re-read a sentence to understand the meaning.

Do not make your readers search for the meaning of the sentence.
Actor and action separated
The Pembroke Welsh Corgi, originally bred to be a herding dog that loves to learn new things, is an intelligent and athletic dog.

Actor and action together
Originally bred to be a herding dog, the Pembroke Welsh Corgi is an intelligent and athletic dog that loves to learn new things.
Emphasize the important information.

- Put the old or familiar information at the **beginning** of your sentences.
- Put the new, most important, or unfamiliar information, including technical terms, at the **end** of your sentences.
- Keep related topics together.
- Repeat key words, phrases, and terms.
Tie your sentences together.

To make your paragraphs flow

- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence.
- Use the middle sentences to comment, explain, or give details for the topic sentence.
- Use the last sentence to segue into a new topic.
- Use effective transitions between sentences and between paragraphs.
The English imported male horses called 'stallions' from Arabia, Persia and Turkey. These imported horses were crossed with English mares to produce 'thoroughbreds'. A thoroughbred is a pedigree horse, bred for racing. All true thoroughbreds around the world can be traced back to three Arab stallions. These three stallions were the 'Byerley Turk,' the 'Darley Arabian,' and the 'Godolphin' Arabian.

These three stallions arrived in England between 1689 and 1728...
Use specific and unambiguous language.

- Use “such as” or “for example” statements.
- Tell brief stories or give short scenarios to illustrate your point.
- Make comparisons your readers will understand.
- Use correct grammar and effective sentence structure.
The US has used weather radar since 1950, which is precisely why we need replacements; the current system is outdated and almost impossible to repair.

For comparison, imagine you’re still using the black and white TV set your family bought in the fifties. The set would be technically outdated, receiving only black and white pictures and monophonic sound even though color and stereo are now available. Worse, it uses vacuum tube technology. Try finding a replacement for one of those!

Source: http://www.crh.noaa.gov/mpx/history/WSR57-DuaneOMalley.JPG
Avoid unclear language.

To keep your writing clear and consistent

- Avoid misplaced modifiers.
- Avoid dangling modifiers.
- Eliminate faulty word choices.
- Use terminology consistently and correctly.
Example

**Misplaced modifier**
Shooting at the last second, the game was won by Dirk Nowitski.

**Dangling modifier**
Shooting at the last second, the game was won.

**Correct modifier**
Dirk Nowitski shot the ball in the last second and won the game.
Example

Faulty word choice
The scientist was mad.

Terminology use inconsistently
The mail carrier walked across the lawn. The scientist disliked the postal carrier.

Correct word choice and consistency
The scientist was angry because the mail carrier walked across the lawn. The scientist disliked the mail carrier.

Source: http://www.justforscientists.com/images/madscientist.jpg
Use only the words your readers need.

- Eliminate redundancies.
  - Doubled words
  - Redundant modifiers
- Watch for redundancy in foreign phrases.
- Eliminate unnecessary words.
- Eliminate there is/ there are constructions.
- Eliminate wordy phrases and unnecessary narrators.
Doubled words

- full and complete
- hope and trust
- first and foremost
- fair and reasonable
- basic and fundamental
- null and void
- each and every
- if and when
- any and all
- help and consideration
Redundant modifiers

- completely free
- close proximity
- past experience
- free gift
- future plans
- ten in number
- red in color
- end result
- past memories
- personal opinion
- repeat again
- very unique
- true facts
Unnecessary narrators/wordy phrases

- as a matter of fact
- with reference to
- it is interesting to note
- to the extent that
- we should point out
- we think
- in my opinion
- in view of
- it is evident
- it is important that
There are problems that the users encountered with the new software.

As a matter of fact, we see that there are problems the users encountered with the new software.

The users encountered problems with the new software.
Use simple (not fancy) words

Instead of
- accelerate
- ascertain
- at the present time
- facilitate
- limited number
- endeavor

Use
- speed up
- find out
- now
- help
- few
- try
Use positive, inoffensive, nonsexist language.

Instead of the negative
You can’t do anything about it.
Do not walk on the grass.

Use the positive
You have the option of staying with the current system.
Stay on the path.
Instead of saying what something is not, say what it is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>not many</td>
<td>few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not on time</td>
<td>late, delayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not accurate</td>
<td>inaccurate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not now</td>
<td>later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not succeed</td>
<td>failed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use inoffensive language.

When referring to persons with disabilities, focus on the person, not the disability. Use positive, accurate terminology.

Offensive
The doctor diagnosed the autistic boy.

Inoffensive
The doctor diagnosed the boy with autism.
Use nonsexist language.

Eliminate references to gender in nouns that refer to job functions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexist</th>
<th>Nonsexist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chairman</td>
<td>chair, chairperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>policeman, fireman</td>
<td>police officer, firefighter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waitress, stewardess</td>
<td>server, flight attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman doctor, male nurse</td>
<td>doctor, nurse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use “you” instead of “he” or “she.”

**Sexist**
The user should read the manual before she calls for help.

**Nonsexist**
You should read the manual before you call for help.
- or -
Read the manual before you call for help.

*Source: [http://www.comliveserv.com/EEO%20employees.jpg](http://www.comliveserv.com/EEO%20employees.jpg)*
Use the plural form of nouns instead of the singular if possible.

**Sexist**
Each employee should maintain his own uniform.

**Incorrect pronoun**
Each employee should maintain their own uniform.

**Nonsexist, correct pronoun**
Employees should maintain their own uniforms.
Avoid terms that qualify by social status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ladies</td>
<td>women, females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gentlemen</td>
<td>men, males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bums</td>
<td>homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needy</td>
<td>underprivileged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use consistent and appropriate technical terms

- Explain terminology by using examples and comparisons when necessary.
- Use only the technical terms your readers need and understand.
- Use only the abbreviations your readers need, and use those abbreviations consistently.
- Put technical terms at the end of the sentence.
Consider your readers’ cultures and languages.

- Avoid idioms and metaphors.
- Try to avoid brand names.
- Explain technical terms to avoid misunderstandings.
- Avoid localisms.
- Use clear, complete, simple sentences with correct emphasis.
George Orwell’s Tips for Good Writing

- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech [that] you are used to seeing in print.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.