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# Introduction to this handout

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This handout in no way substitutes taking a technical writing course, but is intended to communicate some of the concepts taught in such a class to those who have not had the opportunity of taking one. This handout is a summary of some of the most important information found in most technical writing classes and texts. This is intended to be a reference to help you develop your writing style to a professional level. It is recommended that this handout be used as a starting point in making this transition. For more information on any of the topics discussed, please consult the references provided at the end of the handout.

# Purpose

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There are two general purposes for technical writing:

- To inform (reports, instructions, descriptions)
  - To provide the audience with factual information
- To persuade (proposals, recommendations)
  - To convince the audience to draw the desired conclusions from the provided information

# To inform

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- Remain as concise as possible.
- Explain ideas in enough detail to make it understandable to your audience.
- “Given to new” method – For each new piece of information tie it in to knowledge the audience already has.

# To persuade

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- Try to remain, or appear to remain, as objective as possible.
- Appeal to logic, not emotion.
- Provide evidence for all arguments
- Answer the question “Why?”
  - “Why is this important?”, “Why is this beneficial?”, “Why is this a problem?”

# Audience

- Just as you have a purpose in writing, your audience has a purpose in reading.
- Your goal is to ensure that the ideas you have when writing are the same ideas that your audience has when reading.
- Determine who your audience is so you can focus in on as small a group as possible.
  - The broader the audience, the larger the chance that the same information will be interpreted in different ways.

# How to determine your audience

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- Do this by considering the following questions.
  - What is their area and level of education?
  - What is their knowledge of your subject?
  - What is their position?
  - What is their demographic information?
  - What is the relationship or status that exists between your audience and yourself?

# Style and diction

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- There are two fundamentals to increasing the probability that your audience will interpret your work as you intended.
  - Be clear.
  - Be concise.

# Clarity

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- Avoid ambiguous pronoun reference.
- Avoid ambiguous modifiers.
- Break up long noun strings.
- Prefer the active voice
- When to use the passive voice
- Avoid nominalizations
- Maintain parallelism
- Use transition words
- Use intelligent repetition

# Avoid ambiguous pronoun reference

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## **Ambiguous**

Our terminal patients enjoy the warm days  
while they last.

## **Clear**

While the warm days last, our terminal  
patients enjoy them.

# Avoid ambiguous modifiers

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## **Ambiguous**

Only press the red button in an emergency.

## **Clear**

In an emergency, press the red button only.

# Break up long noun strings

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## **Complex**

Surplus production energy capacity price fluctuation control policies seem doomed to failure.

## **Clear**

The policies for controlling price fluctuations caused by surplus production in energy capacity seem doomed to failure.

[CLARITY](#) [STYLE & DICTION](#) [MAIN](#)

# Prefer the active voice

- Active voice sentences clearly state who the actor is and what the actor is doing.

## **Unclear**

The formula was discovered by the scientist.

*or*

The formula was discovered.

## **Clear**

The scientist discovered the formula.

[CLARITY](#) [STYLE & DICTION](#) [MAIN](#)

# When to use the passive voice

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- When the actor is commonly known
- When the actor is irrelevant
- When telling what you did in a report or other document (excluding introduction and conclusion.)
  - Say “The two wires were connected” not “I connected the two wires.”
  - But still say “The second method produced better results” not “Better results were produced by the second method.”

# Avoid nominalizations

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- Nominalizations are verbs that are turned into nouns. Ex. reduce  $\Rightarrow$  reduction

## **Unclear**

The new system lead to a reduction in costs.

## **Clear**

The new system reduced costs.

# Maintain parallelism

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- Parallelism is putting related ideas into the same form.

## **Nonparallel**

Tungsten steel alloys are tough, ductile, and have a great deal of strength.

## **Parallel**

Tungsten steel alloys are tough, ductile, and strong.

# Use transition words

- Use transition words to combine thoughts between sentences.
- These words make the flow smoother and the transition less abrupt.
  - However
  - Therefore
  - Although
  - Additionally
  - Furthermore
  - Nevertheless
  - Likewise
  - Alternatively
  - Conversely
  - Consequently

# Use intelligent repetition

- Don't use different words to represent the same idea.

## **Unclear**

Land deterioration is a major problem today.  
Many causes of such degradation exist.

## **Clear**

Land deterioration is a major problem today.  
Many causes of such deterioration exist.

# Concision

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- Eliminate redundancy
- Write positively
- Paragraph often
- Use reasonable sentence length
- Limit “to be” verbs
- Delete meaningless words
- Delete doubled words
- Delete redundant categories
- Reduce phrases to words

# Eliminate redundancy

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- Remove words that can be inferred from another.

- *Past* history

- *Basic* essentials

- *Completely* finished

- *Mutual* cooperation

- *Dead* corpse

- *End* result

- *The month of* May

- *Utter* devastation

# Write positively

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- It usually takes more words to convey the same idea in a negative form than in a positive form.

**Positive**

Write positively.

**Negative**

Do not write negatively.

# Paragraph often

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- Paragraph often to break up dense text.
- A good rule of thumb is 60-100 words for an average paragraph.

# Use reasonable sentence length

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- Keep sentences so that readers don't have to remember too much information to understand the sentence.
- Most sentences average 20 words.
- If a sentence is exceeding 40 words, try to find a way to break it up into smaller sentences.

# Limit “to be” verbs

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- Limit the use of conjugations of the verb “to be.”

## **Wordy**

It was the second method that we used.

## **Concise**

We used the second method.

# Delete meaningless words

- Avoid words that do not add any meaning to a sentence.
  - Basically
  - Generally
  - Kind of
  - Actually

The picture was kind of blurry.

*means the same as*

The picture was blurry.

# Delete doubled words

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- Do not use word pairs that mean the same thing.
  - Goals and objectives
  - First and foremost
  - Basic and fundamental
  - Hopes and desires
  - Each and every
  - Fully and completely
  - One and the same
  - Ways and means

# Delete redundant categories

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- Many words imply their category.
- Don't restate the category after such words.
  - Round in shape
  - Large in size
  - Blue in color
  - Heavy in weight
  - Sour in taste
  - Shiny in appearance
  - Smooth in texture
  - Honest in character

# Reduce phrases to words

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- Many phrases can be expressed in fewer words or even in a single word.
  - For this reason  $\Rightarrow$  so
  - Due to the fact that  $\Rightarrow$  because
  - At a much greater rate than  $\Rightarrow$  faster
  - Despite the fact that  $\Rightarrow$  although
  - A great deal of  $\Rightarrow$  much

# Organization

- One of the surest ways to confuse a reader is to have a poor organizational scheme.
- Choose the organizational method based on the document being written and the information going into it.
- The three most common methods are:
  - Chronological
  - Deductive
  - Inductive

# Chronological

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- A chronological scheme organizes information based on the time of occurrence.
- Chronological organization is usually used in describing processes or giving instructions.

# Deductive

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- Deductive organization is also known as division.
- Start with the larger ideas and break them down into smaller parts.
- General  $\Rightarrow$  specific

# Inductive

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- Inductive organization is also known as classification.
- Start with the smaller ideas and build the larger ideas out of these smaller ones.
- Specific  $\Rightarrow$  general

# Available resources

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- The following resources are available for more information on any of the topics covered in this document, or just for general information on technical writing.
- The resources are organized into the following categories:
  - [Books](#)
  - [Web sites](#)
  - [People](#)
  - [Other](#)

# Books

- Bly, R., & Blake, G. (1982). Technical writing: structure, standards, and style. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Finkelstein, L, Jr. (2000). Pocket book of technical writing for engineers and scientists. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Jones, D. (2000). The technical communicator's handbook. Needham Heights, Ma: Allyn and Bacon.
- Pearsal, T. (2001). The elements of technical writing. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Vanalstyne, J., & Tritt, M. (2002). Professional and technical writing strategies. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Williams, J. (1990). Style: toward clarity and grace. Chicago, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company.

[AVAILABLE RESOURCES](#) [MAIN](#)

# Web sites

- Karper, E. & Neyhart, D. Purdue online writing: lab<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- The Writing Center at Rensselaer:  
<http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/>
- McMurrey, D. Online technical writing: online textbook:  
<http://www.io.com/~hcexres/tcm1603/achtml/acctoc.html>
- Strunk, W., Jr. The elements of style:  
<http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html>

# People

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- Odell, Lee. LL&C department, Sage 4302, [odellc@rpi.edu](mailto:odellc@rpi.edu)
- Swarts, Jason. LL&C department, Sage 2510, [swartj@rpi.edu](mailto:swartj@rpi.edu)
- Eaton, Angela, LL&C department, [eatona@rpi.edu](mailto:eatona@rpi.edu)
- Hart-Davidson, William, Lee. LL&C department, Sage 4402, [hartdw@rpi.edu](mailto:hartdw@rpi.edu)

# Other

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- The Writing Center at Rensselaer. Sage 4508.  
[writingcenter@rpi.edu](mailto:writingcenter@rpi.edu)
- Online writing help. AOL Instant Messenger  
screen name: instant writer
- Technical and professional communications,  
WRIT-4120