

Technical Writing Standards and Style Guidelines

1. Appear knowledgeable, build credibility, and use professional tone and language
 - a. Use first and last name(s) when referencing an author(s) the first time. After that, refer to authors by last name or include a title: *Jones or Smith OR Dr. Jones or Ms. Smith*. Never refer to authors by first name only.
 - b. Use discipline-specific style guides for in-text citations and reference pages
 - c. Be professional in all your correspondence
 - d. Proofread
2. Target technical information to audience type
 - a. Technical documents are written for a variety of audiences:
 - i. **High tech:** *other engineers and computer scientists, managers with technical background*
 - ii. **Semi-tech:** *technicians, technical sales representatives*
 - iii. **Low-tech:** *co-workers in other departments such as marketing*
 - iv. **Managerial:** *managers and executives*
 - v. **Non-technical or Lay person:** *individuals with no technical background or knowledge*
3. Use active voice
 - a. In active voice, the sentence's subject performs the action. In passive voice, the subject is acted upon or eliminated from the sentence. (The previous sentence is an example of passive voice.)
 - b. Active voice is concise and dynamic:
 - i. **Active:** *Mark spilled the chemicals.*
 - ii. **Passive:** *The chemicals were spilled by Mark.*
 - iii. **Passive:** *The chemicals were spilled.*
 - c. Write most technical documents in active voice
 - d. Use passive voice when the action is more important than who or what performed the action.
 - i. *Three soldiers were killed in the attack.* (The writer does not know who performed the actions.)
 - ii. Lab reports are often written in passive voice.
4. Technical writing is:
 - a. Bias-free (do not perpetuate stereotypes about gender, ethnicity, age, physical/mental disability)
 - b. Opinion free and emotion-free (avoid I feel, I think, I believe, and We love)
 - i. **Incorrect:** *I feel this wasteful policy ought to be revoked*
 - ii. **Correct:** *Based on the research, the committee should revoke wasteful policy.*
 - c. Gender-neutral (avoid gender-specific words)
 - i. **Incorrect:** *A student planning to graduate this spring should see **his** advisor.*
 - ii. **Correct:** *Students planning to graduate this spring should see **their** advisor.*
 - iii. **Correct:** *Students planning to graduate this spring should see **an** advisor.*
 - iv. **Correct:** *If you are planning to graduate this spring, you should see **your** advisor.*

5. Avoid:

- a. Redundancies
 - i. **Incorrect:** *true fact, absolutely free, summarize briefly, fuse together, exactly identical, basic fundamentals*
 - ii. **Correct:** *fact, free, summarize, fuse, identical, fundamentals*
- b. Non-specific references and words
 - i. **Non-specific:** *The contractor needs to adjust the weight **a bit**.*
 - ii. **Specific:** *The contractor needs to adjust the weight by 15 lbs.*
- c. Filler words (*that, like, so*)
 - i. **Filler:** *I thought that we would study for the exam.*
 - ii. **No filler:** *I thought we would study for the exam.*
- d. Abstract language (*really, very, quite, severely, extremely, some*)
 - i. **Abstract:** *To excel in college, you will have to work really hard.*
 - ii. **Concrete:** *To excel in college, you need to study 30 hours a week.*
- e. Generalizations (everyone knows . . ., nobody ever . . .)
 - i. *Global climate change stands to alter the world **forever**.*
- f. Elaborate words (choose simple words readers can understand)
 - i. **Incorrect:** *We are **cognizant** of your need for **issuance** of citations **pursuant** to code 18-B1 CPR violation.*
 - ii. **Correct:** *We are aware of the need to send citations due to violations of code 18-B1, Continuing Property Record (CPR).*

6. Use correct narrative for the appropriate document (1st, 2nd, 3rd person)

- a. **First person:** The person speaking or writing (I, me, my, we, us)
 - i. *Use 1st person for letter, emails, memos, and some reports*
- b. **Second person:** The person spoken to (your, you, or the implied you)
 - i. *Use 2nd person for instructions or procedures*
- c. **Third person:** The person being spoken about (him, her, it, them, them)
 - i. *Use 3rd person to write reports and proposals*
- d. Most technical documents are written using 3rd person
- e. Most business documents are written in a combination of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person

7. Define technical terms, processes, acronyms, and jargon and use appropriately for audience

- a. Well known acronyms do not need to be spelled out:
 - i. NASA, GPS, EPA
- b. Spell out the official title first and follow with the acronym in parenthesis
 - i. Ground Support Equipment (GSE)

8. Sentence structure should not be wordy, awkward, or confusing

- a. **Wordy:** *The point I wish to make is that the employees working at this company are in need of a much better manager of their money.*
- b. **Better:** *Employees at this company need a better money manager.*
- c. **Wordy:** *She took the beaker off of the burner.*
- d. **Better:** *She took the beaker off the burner.*

9. Avoid contractions
 - a. **Incorrect:** *it's they're, we're, can't don't, doesn't, didn't, you're, etc.*
 - b. **Correct:** *it is, they are, we are, cannot, do not, does not, did not, you are, etc.*
10. Maintain consistent tense (do not shift tense within a sentence, paragraph, or section)
11. Sentences in technical writing are 10-20 words long.
12. Paragraphs in technical writing are 4-6 typed lines long (not 4-6 sentences).
13. Each paragraph needs a topic sentence and supporting sentences
 - a. Discuss one topic per paragraph
 - b. Remember Macro and Micro ABC approach to organization
 - i. Macro: the whole paper has an Abstract, Body, and Conclusion.
 - ii. Micro: each paragraph has a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and transition sentence. The transition can be a part of the topic sentence, or a combination of the concluding sentence of one paragraph and the topic sentence of the following paragraph.
14. Use transitions to create flow and continuity from sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, and section to section
 - a. **Time:** *next, second, meanwhile, afterward*
 - b. **Compare:** *likewise, in addition to, as, similarly, like*
 - c. **Contrast:** *even though, in contrast to, although*
 - d. **Concluding:** *finally, to sum up, to summarize*
 - e. **Add information or clarity:** *for example, along with, next, for instance, in other words*
15. Use examples and metaphors to enhance meaning but avoid clichés or slang
 - a. **Metaphor:** *Sir William Bragg said, "When two atoms approach each other at great speeds, they go through one another, while at moderate speeds, they bounce off each other like two billiard balls."*
 - b. **Cliché:** *Calculating the wind speed of a transverse rotor helicopter is **easier said than done.***