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## Introduction to this handout

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.

MAIN

## Purpose

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

MAIN

## To inform

- 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.

PURPOSE MAIN

## To persuade

- 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?”

PURPOSE MAIN

## 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.

MAIN

## How to determine your audience

- 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?

AUDIENCE MAIN

## Style and diction

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

MAIN

## Clarity

- 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

STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**Avoid ambiguous pronoun reference**

**Ambiguous**

Our terminal patients enjoy the warm days while they last.

**Clear**

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

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**Avoid ambiguous modifiers**

**Ambiguous**

Only press the red button in an emergency.

**Clear**

In an emergency, press the red button only.

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**Break up long noun strings**

**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 & DICTON 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 & DICTON MAIN

**When to use the passive voice**

- 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."

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**Avoid nominalizations**

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

**Unclear**

The new system lead to a reduction in costs.

**Clear**

The new system reduced costs.

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**Maintain parallelism**

- 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.

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**Use transition words**

- Use transitions words to combine thoughts between sentences.
- These words make the flow smoother and the transition less abrupt.

• However	•Nevertheless
• Therefore	•Likewise
• Although	•Alternatively
• Additionally	•Conversely
• Furthermore	•Consequently

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

**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 degradatoin exist.

**Clear**

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

CLARITY STYLE & DICTON MAIN

### Concision

- 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

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

### Eliminate redundancy

- Remove words that can be inferred from another.

• <i>Past</i> history	• <i>Dead</i> corpse
• <i>Basic</i> essentials	• <i>End</i> result
• <i>Completely</i> finished	• <i>The month of</i> May
• <i>Mutual</i> cooperation	• <i>Utter</i> devastation

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### Write positively

- 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.

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

### Paragraph often

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

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

### Use reasonable sentence length

- 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.

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### Limit "to be" verbs

- 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.

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### 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.

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### Delete doubled words

- Do not use word pairs that mean the same thing.
 

•Goals and objectives	•Each and every
•First and foremost	•Fully and completely
•Basic and fundamental	•One and the same
•Hopes and desires	•Ways and means

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### Delete redundant categories

- Many words imply their category.
- Don't restate the category after such words.
 

•Round in shape	•Sour in taste
•Large in size	•Shiny in appearance
•Blue in color	•Smooth in texture
•Heavy in weight	•Honest in character

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### Reduce phrases to words

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

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

### 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](#)

[MAIN](#)

### Chronological

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

[ORGANIZATION](#) [MAIN](#)

### Deductive

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

[ORGANIZATION](#) [MAIN](#)

### Inductive

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

[ORGANIZATION](#) [MAIN](#)

### Available resources

- 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](#)

[MAIN](#)

### 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/lc/writecenter/web/>
- McMurrey, D. [Online technical writing: online textbook](#). <http://www.io.com/~hexres/tcm1603/achtml/acctoc.html>
- Strunk, W., Jr. [The elements of style](#): <http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html>

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

### People

- 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)

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

## Other

- 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

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