

CHAPTER 4

Technical Communication Style

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CHAPTER 4 IN A NUTSHELL

Develop a repertoire of strategies to use as you write and revise documents. Mastering just a few key strategies will make your ideas seem clearer to your audience and cause them to trust you.

The basic strategies are

- ▶ Write in the active voice.
- ▶ Use parallelism.
- ▶ Use *there are* sparingly.

▶ Write 12- to 25-word sentences.

▶ Change tone by changing word choice.

The first four principles are common writing advice. The last principle helps create an identity that is appropriate for the situation.

Managers, directors, and people who hire want employees who write clearly. The employers say things like they want “very concise writing which ensures that the idea being promoted is clear.” They want proper spelling, proper grammar, and appropriate sentence structure. One manager said that understanding proper English is a “point of differentiation” in your favor. Appendix A (pp. 558–579) will help you with spelling, grammar, and especially issues with pronouns. This chapter will explain several strategies that will help your writing become clear, concise, and appropriately structured. Most of the sections deal with sentence strategies. The last section focuses on writing a clear paragraph.

Sentence Strategies

If you don’t already know these strategies, how do you learn them? Read over your drafts, looking specifically for the areas where you should make changes in terms of the strategies. Be aware that it takes concentration to use these strategies. The various sections that follow show you what the “bad” constructions look like and provide several ways to fix them.

It helps, at the start of a discussion of style to recall two important concepts. (1) The normal word order in English sentences is subject–verb–object (“Jane threw the ball.” “The Johnsons bought the house.” “That machine pulverizes the grapes.”) Using the subject–verb–object order usually makes the topic easier for the reader to grasp. (2) Readers tend to grasp information better if you arrange items in top-down order. Put the most important idea (the “top”) first and the details (the “bottom”) next. (“We rejected the proposal because it was too costly.” “Her time in the dash was 10.5 seconds.”) Both concepts underlie much of the following advice.

Probably the two most helpful sentence strategies are

- ▶ Write in the active voice
- ▶ Use parallelism

Of course there are a number of other helpful strategies. They include

- ▶ Use *there are* constructions carefully
- ▶ Avoid “nominalizations”
- ▶ Put the main idea first, if possible
- ▶ Try to keep sentence length between 12 and 25 words
- ▶ Use *you* correctly
- ▶ Don’t use sexist constructions
- ▶ Eliminate common clarity errors

Write in the Active Voice

The active voice emphasizes the performer of the action rather than the receiver. The active voice helps readers grasp ideas easily because it adheres to the subject–verb–object pattern and puts the performer of the action first. When the subject

acts, the verb is in the active voice ("I wrote the report"). When the subject is acted upon, the verb is in the passive voice ("The memo was written by me"). As you create your drafts watch for the passive voice; try to find an active way to phrase the idea. If you are unsure about identifying passive voice, your word processor will underline instances if you set the grammar checker to find them. But more than relying on the grammar checker, practice thinking in active voice.

Change Passive to Active

To change a verb from the passive to the active voice:

- Move the person acting out of a prepositional phrase.

Passive	The test was conducted <i>by the intern</i> .
Active	<i>The intern</i> conducted the test.

- Supply a subject (a person or an agent).

Passive	This method was ruled out.
Active	<i>The staff</i> ruled out this method.
Active	<i>I</i> ruled out this method.

- Substitute an active verb for a passive one.

Passive	The heated water is <i>sent</i> into the chamber.
Active	The heated water <i>flows</i> into the chamber.

Use the Passive If It Is Accurate

The passive voice isn't always wrong; sometimes it is more accurate; for instance, it is properly used to show that a situation is typical or usual or to avoid an accusation.

Typical situation needs no agent	Robots are used in repetitive activities.
Active verb requires an unnecessary agent (companies)	Companies use robots in repetitive activities.
Active accuses	You violated the ethics code by doing that.
Passive avoids accusing	The ethics code was violated by that act.

The passive voice can also be used to emphasize a certain word.

Use passive to emphasize milk samples	Milk samples are preserved by the additive.
Use active to emphasize additive	The additive preserves the milk samples.

Use Parallelism

If a sentence or a paragraph has several ideas, parallel structure indicates to the reader that the ideas are equal in value (*coordinate*). The following sentence contains three verbs. They are of equal value because they each tell you what Adam did at each step. They are parallel because each has the same form, past tense. “Adam *went* into the store, *bought* an ice cream cone, and *sat* on a bench eating it.” Using parallelism means using similar structure for similar elements.

Another way to think about parallelism is that words and ideas in a series should have the same structure. Lists use parallelism because the items in the list make up a series. In the following sentence, the italicized words make up a series.

Technical writers create *memos*, *proposals*, and *manuals*.

If coordinate elements (items in a series) in a sentence are not treated in the same way, the sentence is awkward and confusing. In the following sentences the italicized words constitute a series.

Faulty	My duties included <i>coming</i> in early in the morning and doing preparation work, <i>to cook</i> on the front line, <i>trained</i> new employees, and <i>took</i> inventory.
Parallel	My duties included <i>coming</i> in early to do preparation, <i>cooking</i> on the front line, <i>training</i> new employees, and <i>taking</i> inventory.
Faulty	Typical writing situations include <i>proposals</i> , <i>the sending</i> of e-mail, and <i>how to update</i> the system.
Parallel	Typical writing situations include <i>editing</i> proposals, <i>sending</i> e-mail, and <i>updating</i> the system.

Use *There Are* Sparingly

Overuse of the indefinite phrase *there are* and its many related forms (*there is*, *there will be*, etc.) weakens meaning by “burying” the subject in the middle of the sentence. Most sentences are more effective if the subject is placed first. Watch for this construction in your writing. It typically appears regularly when people try to write about technical topics.

Ineffective	<i>There is</i> a change in efficiency policy that could increase our profits.
Effective	Our profits will increase if we change our efficiency policy.
Ineffective	<i>There are</i> three problems that this process has.
Effective	This process has three problems.
Ineffective	<i>There are</i> two reasons why we should talk about abandoning our current location.
Effective	We should abandon our current location for two reasons.

Avoid Nominalizations

Avoid using too many *nominalizations*, verbs turned into nouns by adding a suffix such as *-ion*, *-ity*, *-ment*, or *-ness*. Nominalizations weaken sentences by presenting the action as a static noun rather than as an active verb. These sentences often eliminate a sense of agent, thus making the idea harder for a reader to grasp. Express the true action in your sentences with strong verbs. Almost all computer style checkers flag nominalizations.

Static	The training policy for most personnel will have the <i>requirement</i> of the <i>completion</i> of an initial one-week seminar.
Active	The training policy will <i>require</i> most personnel <i>to complete</i> a one-week seminar.
Static	There will be costs for the <i>installation</i> of this machine in the vicinity of \$10,000.
Active	We can <i>install</i> this machine for about \$10,000. The machine will cost \$10,000 <i>to install</i> .

Put the Main Idea First

To put the main idea first (at the “top”) is a key principle for writing sentences that are easy to understand. Place the sentence’s main idea—its subject—first. The subject makes the rest of the sentence accessible. Readers relate subjects to their own ideas and experiences and thus orient themselves. After readers know the topic, they are able to interact with the complexities you develop.

Note the difference between the following two sentences. In the first, the main idea, “two types of professional writing,” comes near the end. The sentence is difficult to understand. In the second, the main idea is stated first, making the rest of the sentence easier to understand.

Main idea is last	The writing of manufacturing processes, which explain the sequence of a part’s production, and design specifications, which detail the materials needed to produce an object, are two types of professional writing I will do.
Main idea is first	Two types of professional writing that I will do are writing manufacturing processes, which explain the sequence of a part’s production, and design specifications, which detail the materials needed to produce an object.

Write Sentences of 12 to 25 Words

An easy-to-read sentence is 12 to 25 words long. Shorter and longer sentences are harder to read because they become too simple or too complicated. Often parallel structure helps sentences “flow” better. Combine short sentences into a longer

one, connecting the parts with parallel structure. Longer sentences, especially those employing parallel construction, can be easy to grasp. The first of the following sentences is harder to understand, not just because it is long, but also because it ignores the strategy of putting the main idea first. The revision is easier to read because the sentences are shorter and the main idea is introduced immediately.

One sentence, 40 words long	The problem is the efficiency policy, which has measures that emphasize producing as many parts as possible, for instance, 450 per hour, compared to a predetermined standard, usually measured by the machine's capacity, say, 500, for a rating of 90%.
Two sentences, 20 and 21 words long	The problem is the efficiency policy, which calls for producing as many parts as possible compared to a predetermined standard. If a machine produces 450 per hour and if its capacity is 500 per hour, it has a rating of 90%.

Use You Correctly

Do not use *you* in formal reports (although writers often use *you* in informal reports). Use *you* to mean "the reader"; it should not mean "I," or a very informal substitute for "the" or "a" (e.g., "This is your basic hammer.").

Incorrect as "I"	I knew when I took the training course that <i>you</i> must experience the problems firsthand.
Correct	I knew when I took the training course that I needed to experience the problems firsthand.

Avoid Sexist Language

Language is considered sexist when the word choice suggests only one sex even though both are intended. Careful writers rewrite sentences to avoid usages that are insensitive and, in most cases, inaccurate. Several strategies can help you write smooth, nonsexist sentences. Avoid such clumsy phrases as *he/she* and *s/he*. Although an occasional *he or she* is acceptable, too many of them make a passage hard to read.

Sexist	The clerk must make sure that <i>he</i> punches in.
Use an infinitive	The clerk must make sure <i>to punch</i> in.
Use the plural	The clerks must make sure that <i>they</i> punch in.
Use the plural to refer to "plural sense" singulars	Everyone will bring their special dish to the company potluck.

In the last example, *their*, which is plural, refers to *everyone*, which is singular but has a plural sense.

Exercises

► Passive Sentences

1. Make the following passive sentences active.

- When all work is completed, turn the blueprint machine off.
- A link, such as products or specifications, was checked by me.
- The OK button was clicked and the correct link was scrolled down to.
- After these duplicate sites were eliminated there were still too many sites to be looked at.
- Profits can be optimized by the manufacturer with the use of improved materials and the result can be better product value for the customer.
- Revise the passive voice sentences in these paragraphs.

Numerous problems with flexographic printing have to be considered. On very short runs of 1000 or less the cost can be excessive. In addition dot gain is another issue that can be a problem. Small print and reverse print can be other problems with flexography.

The page is entitled features. All of the features of the Netmeeting software are listed down the center of this page. Under each feature a brief discussion of the feature is given so that the user is told what the feature is for. The uses of each feature in detail can be found by clicking on the icon.

► Parallel Structure

2. Revise the following sentences to make their coordinate elements parallel.
 - It serves the purpose of pulling the sheet off the coil and to straighten or guide the sheet through the rest of the machine.
 - The main uses of the data are to supply estimates of the workforce and estimating unemployment.
 - There were clear headings to each section, some links for navigating around the site, and it provided a glossary of terms.
 - During the internship I was responsible for merchandising, creating floor plans, and to train new employees.
 - Along with a case, the laptop package includes 18 feet of top-quality UGA cable, a surge protector with circuit checker, and there is also an extra battery.
3. Write a sentence in which you give three reasons why a particular Web search engine is your favorite. Alternate: Your instructor will provide topics other than Web search engines.
4. Create a paragraph in which your sentence from Exercise 5 is the topic sentence. Write each body sentence using active voice and parallelism.

***Use of There Are**

E. Eliminate *there are*, or any related form, from the following sentences.

- There are several methods of research that I will use.
- There are slowness and inefficiency in the data processing and information retrieval.
- There is a need for some XML code to be learned by me.
- There is a reliance on business to provide product information on the Web.
- There is the necessity to modify packaging methods so that there can be fewer contaminants released into the environment.

***Nominalization**

E. Correct the nominalizations in the following sentences.

- Insertion of the image into the document occurs when you click OK.
- Specification of the file as a Word document was necessary to make the conversion of the file from text to Word.
- The manipulation of the layout in order to cause the transformation of it into film is the process of color separation.
- The use of my two keywords resulted in the best results for me.
- The conversion of the screen captures to JPEGs was easy to perform.

E. Write a paragraph about a concept you know well. Use as many nominalizations, *there are's*, and passive voice combinations as you can. Then rewrite it eliminating all those constructions.

***Use of You**

E. Correct the use of *you* in the following sentences.

- To judge the site's accuracy I read the tutorial and evaluated the lessons. This is where you look for your clear technical explanations and your computer code examples.
- This evaluation is different than the change from your old remote control to the new laser ones.
- Two methods exist to enhance fiber performance. In the first you orient the fibers. The second is the alkali process.

***Sexist Language**

E. Correct the sexist language in the following sentences.

- Each presenter must bring his own laptop.
- Every secretary will hand in her timecard on Friday.
- If he understands the process, the machinist can improve production.
- Details were very good up to a point, but then the author seemed to lose her focus.
- I am not sure who Dr. Jones is, but I am sure he is a good doctor.

Eliminate Common Clarity Errors

Three other common issues that affect clarity are choppy sentences, wordiness and redundancy, and strings of nouns. Learn to identify and change these issues in your drafts.

Avoid Strings of Choppy Sentences

A string of short sentences results in choppiness. Because each idea appears as an independent sentence, the effect of such a string is to deemphasize the more important ideas because they are all treated equally. To avoid this, combine and subordinate ideas so that only the important ones are expressed as main clauses.

Choppy	Both models offer safety belts. Both models have counterbalancing. Each one has a horn. Each one has lights. One offers wing-sided seats. These seats enhance safety.
Clear	Both models offer safety belts, counterbalancing, a horn, and lights. Only one offers wing-sided seats, which enhance safety.

Avoid Wordiness and Redundancy

Generally, ideas are most effective when they are expressed concisely. Try to prune excess wording by eliminating redundancy and all unnecessary intensifiers (such as *very*), repetition, subordinate clauses, and prepositional phrases. Although readers react positively to the repetition of keywords in topic positions, they often react negatively to needless repetition.

Unnecessary subordinate clause	I found the site <i>by the use of keywords that are nanotechnology and innovation</i>
Revised	I found the site using <i>the keywords "nanotechnology" and "innovation."</i>
Redundant intensifiers plus unnecessary subordinate clause	<i>It is made of very thin glass that is milky white in color.</i>
Revised	<i>It is made of thin, milky white glass.</i>
Redundant	The tuning handle is a metal protrusion that can be easily grasped <i>hold of by the hand</i> to turn the gears.
Revised	The tuning handle is a metal protrusion that can be easily grasped to turn the gears.
Unnecessary repetition plus over use of prepositions	<i>This search was done by a keyword search of the same words using the search function of different search engines.</i>
Revised	This investigation used the same keywords in different search engines.

Avoid Noun Clusters

Noun clusters are three or more nouns joined in a phrase. They crop up everywhere in technical writing and usually make reading difficult. Try to break them up.

Noun cluster	Allowing <i>individual input variance of data process entry</i> will result in <i>higher keyboarder morale</i> .
Revised	We will have higher morale if we allow the keyboarders to enter data at their own rate.

Exercises

Choppiness

1. Eliminate the choppiness in the following sentences.

- XYZ has introduced an LCD monitor. The monitor is 17 inches. The monitor has a Web camera. Web conferencing applications can use the Web camera.
- Numerical control exists in two forms. CNC is one form. CNC is Computer Navigated Control. DNC is Distributed Numerical Control.
- On-line registration is frustrating. It should make it faster to register. The words on the screen are not self-explanatory. Screen notices say things like "illegal command." Retracing a path to a screen is difficult.

Mordiness and Redundancy

2. Revise the following sentences, removing unnecessary words.

- Due to the fact that we have two computer platforms connected together, we must pay attention to basic fundamentals when we send a document such as an e-mail attachment.
- This project will be presented in Web format with links to the resource sites as well as other links that are associated with the sites and links that are associated with the topic of researching a report.
- In fact many sites are available on the Web where the viewer can have the actual experience of purchasing equipment, new and used, from the site.
- In the printing business there are two main ways of printing. The first is by using offset and the second is by using flexography.

Write Clear Paragraphs for Your Reader

Put the Topic Sentence First

An easy way to achieve a clear paragraph is to use the top-down strategy. Put the topic sentence first and follow it by several sentences of explanation.

The *topic sentence* expresses the paragraph's central idea, and the remaining sentences develop, explain, and support the central idea. This top-down arrangement enables readers to grasp the ideas in paragraphs more quickly (Slater). In addition putting the topic idea in the first sentence makes it possible for readers to get the gist of your document by skimming over the first sentences.

Consider this example:

Topic sentence	The second remarkable property of muskeg is that, like a great sponge, it absorbs and accumulates water. Water enters a muskeg forest through precipitation (rain and snow) and through the ground (rivers, streams, seeps). It leaves by evaporation (chiefly of vapor transpired by the plants) and by outflow through or over the ground. However, input and output are not in balance. Water accumulates and is held absorbed in the accumulating peat. One of the commonest plants of muskeg is sphagnum moss, otherwise known as peat moss; alive or dead, its water-holding capacity is renowned, and is what gives peat its great water-retaining power. (Pielou 97)
Supporting details	

In a coherent paragraph each sentence amplifies the point of the topic sentence. You can indicate coherence by

- arranging sentences by level
- repeating terms in a new/old sequence,
- placing key terms in the dominant position,
- indicating class or membership,
- using transitions (Mulcahy).

Arrange Sentences by Level

Here is another way to think about the top-down method—think of each sentence as having a “level.” On the first level is the topic sentence. The second level consists of sentences that support or explain the topic sentence. The third level consists of sentences that develop one of the second-level ideas. Four sentences, then, could have several different relationships. For instance, the last three could all expand the idea in the first:

- 1 First level
- 2 Second level
- 3 Second level
- 4 Second level

Or sentences 3 and 4 could expand on sentence 2, which in turn expands on sentence 1:

1 First level**2 Second level****3 Third level****4 Fourth level**

As you write, evaluate the level of each sentence. Decide whether the idea in the sentence is level 2, a subdivision of the topic, or level 3, which provides details about a subdivision. Consider this six-sentence example:

Hydraulic pumps are classified as either nonpositive or positive displacement units. Nonpositive displacement pumps produce a continuous flow. Because of this design, there is no positive internal seal against leakage, and their output varies as pressure varies. Positive displacement pumps produce a pulsating flow. Their design provides a positive internal seal against leakage. Their output is virtually unaffected as system pressure varies.

The sentences of this paragraph have the following structure:

- (1) Hydraulic pumps are classified as either nonpositive or positive displacement units.
- (2) Nonpositive displacement pumps produce a continuous flow.
- (3) Because of this design, there is no positive internal seal against leakage, as their output pressure varies.
- (2) Positive displacement pumps produce a pulsating flow.
- (3) Their design provides a positive internal seal against leakage.
- (3) Their output is virtually unaffected as the system pressure varies.

Globalization and Style

When writing for an audience whose first language is not English, you need to be as clear and concise as possible. You do not need to “dumb down” your style, but in order for your document to be effective, you will need to think about the way in which you write (Dehaas).

An important aspect of communicating with other cultures is understanding their way of “categorization”: how they divide and perceive the world. Lakoff states that “Categorisation is not to be taken lightly; there is nothing more basic than categorisation to our thought, perception, action, and speech.” (Lakoff 5). In other words some cultures see it as a virtue to go “astray and revert” and pursue the central idea, whereas other cultures see it as virtue to follow a clear and narrow line of thought from beginning to end.

However, some guidelines for good writing can be given irrespective of the deeper levels of thought.

Put only one idea in each sentence.

Focus on making the subject and the action clear—you can accomplish this by keeping your sentences in natural order: subject first, verb in the middle,

(Continued)

and predicate last, as shown in the first sentence in the following example below. If you use a subordinate clause, put the clause where it makes the strongest focus and makes the best cohesive link, as in sentences 2 and 3 in the following example. Avoid too many subject holders and antecedents, which are pronouns; write the word for the real subject instead. In sentence 2, replace “they” with “the modules” and in sentence 3, replace “they” with “modules” or “power supply.” By doing so, you avoid ambiguities in the sentences.

Our electronic circuit protection modules provide the preferred solid-state protection for secondary circuits of switched mode power supplies. Faster than the self-protection of the power supply, they are designed to accommodate inductive and capacitance loads, avoiding nuisance tripping. When they do trip, an indicator shows which of four circuits caused the fault, saving troubleshooting time. (Rockwell)

Stay away from examples that require readers to understand metaphors outside of their experience. For instance, the sentence “That approach hit a home run” depends for its meaning on the ability to translate “home run” into “very successful.” Examples linking up with a certain culture often call for localized translations to other cultures, which take a lot of effort and time and thus add to the costs!

Consider your word choice. You can cause confusion without ever being aware of it. By using the word *outlet*, meaning a place into which an electric plug is inserted, readers from another culture might be unfamiliar with the American usage, asking “Is ‘outlet’ a door or window?” (The UK word is *socket*, for instance).

Use consistent vocabulary. Once you use a word for an object, continue to use the same word. If you use “screen,” do not suddenly switch to a synonym, for example, to “page” or “Web page.” English often has many words for the same object or phenomenon, and writers often like to vary their language, but variation in the specific vocabulary is confusing. Variation should be confined to common-core language and function words.

Use an adequate mix between the active voice and the passive voice. Use “The manager accepted the proposal” instead of “The proposal was agreed to by the manager.” The choice of active and passive voice, however, depends on the genre. In some situations, for instance, a document that explains how a machine performs a certain action, it is sometimes difficult to avoid the passive form. Likewise, in legal writing, it is sometimes not desired to have an agent in the sentence.

Write words in full instead of using contractions, especially in negative statements. Say “Do not use” rather than “Don’t use”; the use of the separate word *not* gives the statement more emphasis. However, consider revising the sentence to state the issue positively. For instance, avoid instructions like this: “Do not put away your old freezer without ruining the lock. Children might use it to play hide and seek and die from lack of air, because the lock can only be opened from the outside.” A positive instruction would be phrased

like: "Always ruin the lock of a freezer before putting it away to prevent accidents." Another example is: "Do not smoke cigars or a pipe near the lawn mower." The ironical question then is "Well, can you then smoke pot near a lawn mower"?

Use -ing and -ed forms carefully. These forms cause difficulty in understanding. Consider this sentence: *The car body is spray-painted by a robot passing through a room.* Notice that the subject of the sentence (*car body*) is not the subject of the -ing form "passing;" *robot* is. That slight change can make your sentences difficult to translate. The sentence can be revised so that the agent performs both acts: *Passing through a room, the car body is spray-painted by a robot.* Although the sentences contain exactly the same words, shifting of -ing form to the beginning from end solves the problem. The car body passes through, and it is spray painted (Mousten).

For further reference, check out these websites:

IBM "Guideline B: Writing for an International Audience" <<http://www-01.ibm.com/software/globalization/guidelines/guideb.html>> has articles on writing, communicating, and presenting for an international community. You'll find tips on writing style as well as articles on cultural sensitivity issues. A complete list of its guidelines for writing for global audiences can be found at "Guidelines Quick Reference" <http://www-01.ibm.com/software/globalization/guidelines/outline.html>>

Repeat Terms in a New/Old Sequence

Sentences in a paragraph can follow an alternating sequence of supplying new information, which in turn becomes old information as the next sentence adds more new information. In the following example, notice that the *new* information, *collided* (sentence 1), becomes *old* information, *collision* (sentences 2 and 3), and that *mountain range* is *new* information in sentence 3 but *old* information in sentence 4.

Subduction stopped when the continent *collided* with the island arc along its northern margin. This *collision* resulted in extensive deformation of the island arc as well as deformation of the sedimentary rocks on the continental margin described earlier. The *collision* produced a *mountain range* across northern Wisconsin. This ancient *mountain range* is called the Penokean Mountains. The eroded remnants of these *mountains* constitute much of the bedrock of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan. (LaBerge 111)

Use the Dominant Position

Placing terms in the dominant position means to repeat a key term as the subject, or main idea, of a sentence. In the earlier paragraph notice that

in sentences 2 and 3 *collision* appears first in sentences 2 and 3. The repetition returns readers to the same topic where they find it developed in another way.

Maintain Class or Membership Relationships

To indicate class or membership relationships, use words that show that the subsequent sentences are subparts of the topic sentence. In the following sentences, *distributed media* and *online systems* are members of the class *paradigm*. *Notice that the two terms also appear in the dominant position and that, if you indicated their level, they would both begin level 2 ideas.*

Interactive multimedia follows one of two paradigms. Distributed media, such as CDs, are self-contained and circulated to audiences in the same manner as books or audio recordings. Online systems, such as intranets and the Web, resemble broadcasting in that the content originates from one central location and the user accesses it from a distance. (Bonime and Pohlman 177)

Provide Transitions

Using transitions means connecting sentences by using words that signal a sequence or a pattern. The common transitions such as *first/second, not only/but also, however, therefore, and, and but* are well known. For easy reading stay consistent. If you say “first” follow later with “second.” While the paragraph might not read quite as elegantly as one that used less obvious transitions, the clearly indicated sequence will keep your reader from getting lost. It is fine to begin a sentence with *but*. However, that position makes the word quite emphatic, calling attention to the oncoming sentence as very important.

Choose a Tone for the Reader

The strategies discussed thus far in this chapter make your documents easy to read. These strategies, however, assume that the reader and the writer are unemotional cogs in an information-dispensing system. It is as though reader and writer were the cut-and-paste commands in a word processing program. Create the idea on this page (the writer), cut and paste to a new page (the reader), and the new page has the information in exactly the same form as the old page.

Writing situations are not that predictable. The tone, or emotional attitude implied by the word choice, can communicate almost as much as the content of a

Focus on Ethical Style

Use Unambiguous Language

Suppose, for instance, that you are writing a manual for a machine that has a sharp, whirling part under a protective cover. This dangerous part could slice off a user's fingers. When you explain how to clean the part, you inform the reader of the danger in a manner that prompts him or her to act cautiously. It would be unethical to write, "A hazard exists if contact is made with this part while it is whirling." That sentence is not urgent or specific enough to help a user prevent injury. Instead write, "Warning! Turn off all power before you remove the cover. The blade underneath could slice off your fingers!"

However, the need for unambiguous language appears in other much less dramatic situations. Take, for instance, the phrase "When I click the 'Submit' button, it doesn't work." This phrasing is so imprecise that it does not allow another person to act in a helpful way. How can someone fix it if he or she does not know what is not working? But that phrasing also indicates a moral stance—"I am not responsible. It is your job. I will not take the time and effort to right this, whatever inconvenience it may cause you." This kind of ambiguous use of language certainly is not dangerous, the way the previous example was, but it is a refusal to take responsibility in the situation. As such, the language does not help other people achieve their goals. It is wrong, not just because it is imprecise, but because it does not help the stakeholders.

Use Direct, Simple Expression

Say what you mean in a way that your reader will easily understand. Suppose you had to tell an operator how to deal with a problem with the flow of toxic liquid in a manufacturing plant. A complex, indirect expression of a key instruction would look like this:

If there is a confirmation of the tank level rising, a determination of the source should be made.

A simple, direct expression of the same idea looks like this:

Determine if the tank level is rising. Visually check to see if liquid is coming out of the first-floor trench.

Clarity is the gold standard for all communication. Jargon, shop talk, or technobabble that marginalizes or excludes the reader or audience is not only confusing, it is unethical. It is both reasonable and desirable to create prose, be it technical or otherwise, that is written for its intended audience. Unfortunately, sometimes it is all too easy to slide into a vernacular that is common among those in-house. To use terms that are unique to a particular discursive community can create a boundary between the document and its intended audience. If you must use jargonistic terms, include a glossary, or define the term the first time you use it in the text. If your language can be misconstrued, it can cause problems. A good general rule is to guard against any use of terms that are common in-house when the audience for the document is "out of house." This is not only good practice; it is the ethical thing to do.

message (Fielden). To communicate effectively, you must learn to control tone. Let's consider four possible tones:

- Forceful
- Passive
- Personal
- Impersonal

The *forceful* tone implies that the writer is in control of the situation or that the situation is positive. It is appropriate when the writer addresses subordinates or when the writer's goal is to express confidence. To write forcefully,

- Use the active voice.
- Use the subject-verb-object structure.
- Do not use "weasel words" (*possibly, maybe, perhaps*).
- Use imperatives.
- Clearly indicate that you are the responsible agent.

I have decided to implement your suggestion that we supply all office workers with laptops and eliminate their towers. This suggestion is excellent. You have clearly made the case that this change will reduce eyestrain issues and will greatly enhance the flow of information in the department. Make an appointment with me so we can start to implement this fine idea.

The *passive* tone implies that the reader has more power than the writer or that the situation is negative. It is appropriate when the writer addresses a superior or when the writer's goal is to neutralize a potentially negative reaction. To make the tone passive,

- Avoid imperatives.
- Use the passive voice.
- Use "weasel words" (*very, several people, quite, fairly*).
- Use longer sentences.
- Do not explicitly take responsibility.

The proposal to implement laptops in our department has not been accepted because of a number of very difficult issues. To our surprise several people have indicated that the ergonomic benefits of the screens are not seen as not quite offsetting the potential disruption that will be caused by the migration of files to the new machines. The large footprint of the docking station has also been suggested as a possible problem for our employees due to their fairly restricted desk space. Because the need for action on computer replacement is necessary, a meeting will be scheduled next week to discuss this.

Compare this to a forceful presentation:

The steering committee and I reject the laptop proposal. You have not included enough convincing data on morale or work flow, and you have not dealt with work flow disruption and the large size of the docking station. Make an appointment to see me if necessary.

The *personal* tone implies that reader and writer are equal. It is appropriate to use when you want to express respect for the reader. To make a style personal,

- Use the active voice.
- Use first names.
- Use personal pronouns.
- Use short sentences.
- Use contractions.
- Direct questions at the reader.

Ted, thanks for that laptop suggestion. The steering committee loved it. Like you, we feel it will solve the eyestrain issue and will facilitate data flow. And we think it will also raise morale. I'd like you to begin work on this soon. Can you make an appointment to see me this week?

This tone is also appropriate for delivering a negative message when both parties are equal.

Ted, thanks for the laptop suggestion, but we can't do it this cycle. The steering committee understands the ergonomic issue you raise, but they are very concerned about the disruption that migrating all those files will cause. In addition, they feel that we need to work out the entire issue of footprint—the model you suggested would cause a number of problems with current desk configurations. I know that this is a disappointment. Could we get together soon to discuss this?

The *impersonal* tone implies that the writer is not important or that the situation is neutral. Use this tone when you want to downplay personalities in the situation. To make the tone impersonal,

- Do not use names, especially first names.
- Do not use personal pronouns.
- Use the passive voice.
- Use longer sentences.

A decision to provide each employee with a laptop has been made. Laptops will reduce the eye fatigue that some employees have experienced, and the laptops will increase data flow. Ted Baxter will chair the implementation committee. Donna Silver and Robert Sirabian will assist. The committee will hold its initial meeting on Monday, October 10, at 3:00 P.M. in Room 111.