

A BRIEF MANIFESTO ABOUT ACADEMIC WRITING

DAVID L. PASSMORE

Writing is one of the means of production of scholarship. Scholars in training must exhibit good writing skills. And, developing and maintaining these skills persist for an entire career of the active scholar.

Technical writing skill is essential to the work of scholars. The technical side of writing focuses on *how* scholars accomplish writing, not on *what* they write. Successful technical writers are made through hard work and practice and are not “to the manor born.”

Technical writing is viewed more as a craft than an art. Excessive stylistic flair in technical writing is distracting. Valuable tools of the technical writer include proficiency with grammar, spelling, sentence structure, rhetorical strategy, and, especially, divining intended audiences’ information needs.

Producing technical writing is not mere rule-following, however. Technical writing involves granular detail and precise description. Yet, unchecked, these features can result in bloated, heavy prose. So, brevity in technical writing is valued as much as correct prose. In an attempt to resolve the dialectic between fulsome prose and concise composition, students often ask faculty to specify how many words a course essay should contain or how many printed pages a thesis should hold. The answer, of course, is: as many words or pages as it takes to tell the “story” of a paper or a thesis—and, not one more word or page. William Strunk, Jr., author in 1918 of the touchstone for writers, *The Elements of Style*, wrote that

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Successful technical writing makes a delicate balance of information integrity with a minimal presentation.

Most graduate programs for scholars in training offer too few resources necessary to help students hone writing skills. Graduate faculty members wish to believe sanguinely in the figment that graduate students will naturally and simply demonstrate these skills, which the students, as mature adults, presumably developed during their formative years and over their previous professional lives. As a result, consideration of writing skills often is subordinate to primary needs to acquire domain knowledge, only to have writing skill deficits return at critical junctures in a scholar's career (viz., thesis approval, hiring judgments, tenure decisions).

Many opportunities exist to create, expand, and enrich a scholar's repertoire of technical writing skills. I briefly consider in the remainder of this paper the importance of technical writing quality, style requirements, document layout and formatting, proper grammar, usage, learning from other writers (good or bad), spelling, refined nuances of meaning, reading work aloud, writing habits, and openness to criticism. My selection of these particular topics comes from my own writing experiences and mentoring other writers over a 50+-year academic career as an American English speaker/writer. Yep, this document is drawn from my "pet peeves" list. My early formative experiences as a white male Catholic-educated in American culture in the 1950s and 1960s molded my perspectives in important ways.

WRITING SKILLS SIT IN THE NUCLEUS OF SCHOLARSHIP

For the most part, almost all performance valued in graduate programs and faculty life is manifest in writing. Communications. Course papers. Professional materials. Professional publications. All require well-honed writing skills. Without these skills, success in graduate studies and post-graduate careers is doubtful. Graduate faculty members often identify good writing skills as a major factor differentiating successful from unsuccessful doctoral students and forecasting professional success.

Writer, teacher, and editor, William Zinsser, once wrote, "Writing is thinking on paper." Cluttered, vague, imprecise, and dull technical writing reveals cluttered, vague, imprecise, and dull thinking. Skilled technical writing creates a context where readers can consider, interpret, and evaluate ideas and data. If students or faculty members do not write well, perhaps their considerations, interpretations, and evaluations are

muddled. And, if so, how can such a confused and confusing person expect to inform or persuade the serious readers of their prose?

Good technical writing presents interesting and informative ideas, is organized logically, portrays a professional “voice” that is individual and appropriate, uses specific and memorable words, contains smooth and expressive sentences, and applies conventions of spelling, grammar, and usage that are correct and communicative in a field of practice.

There is much truth in the statement that a person knows nothing about a topic until that person has written about it successfully. I invite you to make some tests of this apothegm:

- Can you tie a shoelace? A bow tie? Write instructions for another person to follow flawlessly to tie a shoelace or bow tie successfully.
- Believe you know something about physics? Write an explanation of the concept of “potential energy” in 60 or fewer words that the typical 12-year old can comprehend.
- Do you tell others that you “get” mathematics? Write a description of the meaning of a “derivative of a function” that your grandmother—a grandmother, that is, who is not math savvy—can read and, then, return a clear explanation of the concept to you.
- Pick a fuzzy concept from your field of practice. Write a one-page letter to persuade your significant other that you should devote the following years, perhaps thoroughly foregoing worry about earning income and making contact with family and friends, to study this concept.

GET SOME STYLE

The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association has been designed to advance scholarship by setting sound and rigorous standards for scientific communication.

~ from the “Forward” to the 6th ed.

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* is the gold standard for clear and concise writing and writing mechanics in many fields of the social, behavioral, and educational sciences. The *Manual* can answer essential questions about preparing written documents in those fields. Many graduate programs program adopt the Manual as their official style guide. Therefore, acquiring skills in applying the

Manual's guidelines will be repaid by effectiveness and efficiency in preparing documents required in a graduate program.

MASTER THE MECHANICS OF DOCUMENT LAYOUT AND FORMATTING

An ugly layout suggests an ugly product.

~ David Ogilvy, Scottish-born British military intelligence officer & later top advertising executive, 1911-1999

The *Chicago Manual of Style* is an excellent source of information about the layout and formatting of technical documents. For instance, how is a table formed to fit on a manuscript page? How is a manuscript edited? What are conventions for displaying mathematical copy? How are illustrations accommodated in a manuscript? These and many other questions about layout and format have become quite important for ordinary writers who not only prepare copy for their manuscripts, but, with the advent of word processing capabilities and desktop printing quality, also compose final, camera-ready copy for their manuscripts.

ACQUIRE A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR

The greater part of the world's troubles are [sic] due to questions of grammar.

~ Michel de Montaigne, French philosopher & writer. 1533–1592

Isn't it ironic that my grammar checker mentions that Montaigne used the verb "are" that does not agree with the singular subject of the sentence, "part"? Oh, well. *De gustibus non est disputandum.*

Everyone's bookshelf should hold a copy of the *Perrin-Smith Handbook of Current English* or a similar compendium of grammatical forms and rules (for the "digital-only," a free .pdf is available for download). The book not only acts as a reference while writing but, believe it or not, it makes a good rainy day read for the curious or obsessed.

Writing support is available through online grammar checkers that verify written text for grammatical correctness. Grammar checkers often are implemented as a feature of comprehensive text processing programs, such as word processors, where they started as mere spelling checkers. However, some grammar checkers apply natural language processing capabilities of artificial intelligence to examine prose. These sophisticated checkers, such as *Grammarly* that I use, go far beyond mere grammar checkers to assess prose for correctness, clarity, engagement, and delivery for a specified

audience. They adapt to your preferences for writing. They offer writing advice to you while you are writing.

BUILD ON THE AGENCY OF ENGLISH USAGE

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French writer & aviator, 1900–1944

Henry Fowler's reference book, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, was initially published in 1926. There still is no better guide for a direct, vigorous writing style. For example, should you write "different than" or "different from"? Is it "compared with" or "compared to"? "Which" or "that"? It's all in Fowler's book, friend. Look it up, look it up.

READ THE WORK OF OTHER WRITERS CRITICALLY

Skepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer.

~ George Santayana, Spanish-born American philosopher, poet & humanist, 1863–1952).

Select writers in your field of practice acknowledged by reputation or reward as successful technical writers. Read their work. Ask yourself, what makes their writing successful? Read published research papers. How do authors compose and integrate tables and figures into their manuscripts? How do published authors make their ideas flow throughout their manuscripts? How have the authors maintained consistency and coherence throughout their manuscripts? How are headings and subheadings used to guide the reader and lend an overall impression of the work?

Writing in the passive voice ("The wine is carried by Joe.") in English makes technical writing seem distant and detached. The active voice (Joe carries the wine") often feels more direct and engaging. How have published technical writers you admire handled the passive/active voice mix?

As you read critically, spare no one. Just because someone's work is published in a refereed journal does not certify that the published author is a skilled technical writer. Identify the flaws in published manuscripts. Consider possible improvements.

In sum, learn from other writers' successes and struggles.

SPELL CORRECTLY

When our spelling is perfect, it's invisible. But when it's flawed, it prompts strong negative associations.

~ Marilyn vos Savant, contemporary American writer, 1946–

Spelling should be a “no-brainer.” Use the spell checker provided in the word processing program that you use.

The simple rule: Allow no spelling errors. That being written, you will find that, even with a spell checker active, you must be watchful when you have updated a document, especially when the updates seem so trivial that you are tempted not to check the spelling one more time.

Do not let your guard down.

DEVELOP AN EAR FOR MEANING

Silence is better than unmeaning words.

~ Pythagoras, philosopher & mathematician, 580-500 BC

Precision in selecting and using words is a *sine qua non* for skilled technical writing. Keep an actual or virtual dictionary close as you write. Challenge the meanings of even the words that are most familiar to you. Ask yourself whether the words you have chosen convey the meaning you intend.

Consultation of a thesaurus might lead you to words that more precisely portray the meanings you wish to denote and connote. The aim is not to use a \$5 word where a 25¢ word would do. However, use the \$5 word without hesitation if its use results in a more precise meaning. The aim is to write accurately and correctly. The exactness of meaning counts in technical writing. Neither fear nor ignore delicate nuances in meaning that will affect the message you wish to convey to your reader.

READ YOUR PROSE ALOUD

Everything becomes a little different as soon as it is spoken out loud.

~ Hermann Hesse, German-born Swiss poet, novelist, & painter, 1877–1962)

An independent, disinterested third-party proofreading of your work always is helpful. However, reading your work aloud, not silently, is the best way to spot grammatical lapses, spelling errors, incorrect punctuation, discontinuities, inconsistencies, logical

flaws, and rhythmic awkwardness in the flow of words. Better yet, have someone else read your written documents aloud to you. Have no friends willing to commit to the boredom of reading your work? You can configure some word processing software, such as *Microsoft Word*, to “speak” your document.

Listening to prose read aloud seems to cure most of these perceptual ills that can occur during editing. While reading silently, we subliminally fill in lapses, ignore errors, and even skip over entire phrases containing dropped words and other errors that we perceive to understand. A very human feature is that we apprehend the meaning of whole phrases and paragraphs, not necessarily the individual words and specific grammatical structure, when we read silently. It is only, or even magnificently, human to capture the meaning of written prose in this way. Yet, silent reading to identify elements to edit and revise your written work can result in skipping over flaws in prose.

CURATE A PROCESS FOR WRITING

A system is a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system. A system must have an aim. Without the aim, there is no system.

~ W. Edwards Deming, consultant, statistician, & educator, 1900-1993)

Learn what writing processes and environments work best for you. Install personal supports that facilitate your writing (e.g., writing location, incense, flavored coffee, death metal music, monastic silence, chocolate, etc.).

If your first language is not English, seek and use resources (people or software) to filter out most mistakes that can creep into your writing due to the dissimilarities between your first language and English. For example, perhaps your first language does not use articles (“a,” “an,” “the”) or omits personal pronouns (“he,” “she,” “they”). Perhaps preferred word order in your first language is different than word order that is common in English (e.g., in English: “The big, black, floppy dog”; perhaps in your language: “Dog big black floppy”). Develop a system to check and correct such “translation” problems that can land in your written English prose.

The cultural and linguistic demands on writers of English whose first language is not English often are heavier than for writers whose first language is English. Non-native English users *must be* bilingual, significantly burdening all aspects of scholarly work they plan, conduct, and report in English. It is a tough hurdle to jump, but most graduate programs and writing outlets prefer English. Figure out a way to master it.

LET YOUR GUARD DOWN

If a seed of lettuce will not grow, we do not blame the lettuce. Instead, the fault lies with us for not having nourished the seed properly.

~ reputedly, a Buddhist proverb

Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.

~ Winston Churchill, British orator, author, & Prime Minister, 1874-1965

Not everyone will agree with everything you write. Criticism is inevitable. There is no better barometer of the maturity of a writer than how the writer reacts to criticism.

Consider the process followed. A writer molds words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into sections, and sections into a finished work. Because the writer was the source of the work, carried it through gestation, and delivered it to a waiting world, the writer imbues a great deal of love, pride, and attachment in the written work that has emerged.

Then, when a thoughtful, exacting reader—perhaps an academic advisor of the writer, a journal editor, or, God forbid, the writer’s significant other—criticizes this reputedly beautiful child of the writer’s mind and soul, defensiveness can take over. Denial. Rejection. Endless explaining. Argumentative justification. Grasping for straws. Withdrawal. The tragic unraveling of the defensive writer seems to be a situation that begs for admission to a twelve-step program of personal healing or a detox center for the self-centered (an entrepreneurial opportunity?).

Defensive responses to criticism of written work do not improve the written work. Instead, these behaviors merely protect the writer’s pimply, fragile psyche only temporarily. What is needed, however, is to get on with the writing work at hand.

Remember, writing is an asymmetrical exchange between the writer and the reader. The writer must engage, inform, and persuade the reader. That is a tall order. The inquiring reader merely must be receptive to making this transformation happen. However, suppose the writer’s words and the reader’s intellect do not bond. In that case, the writer must either conclude that the reader is not in the writer’s target audience or, more realistically, that the writer did not communicate with the reader. The burden in the communication process always weighs more on the writer than the reader. After all, the writer is the one who wants the writer’s message to become the reader’s earworm.

The writer’s response to criticism should not be “What is wrong with this knuckle-dragging dunce who hates this beautiful baby I created and nurtured?” but rather “Why

does my baby seem so ugly to people?” Listen to the readers of your writing, and consider their feedback as exciting and as valuable as found money. Stop carping and complaining, and get on with it. Let your first reaction be a warm, genuine smile when someone criticizes your writing.

Most of All, Write

A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it, bearing within him the image of a cathedral.

~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French writer & aviator, 1900–1944

The palest ink is better than the best memory.

~ reputedly, a Chinese proverb

Skills are built and perfected through practice. So, you must write to acquire and maintain technical writing skills. Reading about the process of writing or ruminating about what you *might* write are nothing less than instances of procrastination. When you unnecessarily delay writing, all is lost. As the Spaniards like to say, “It’s not the same to talk of bulls as to be in the bullring.”

Of course, avoiding writing is one of the easier choices writers make. Many hedonistic tendencies support the avoidance of writing. Procrastination is common.

Life is easier if you decide to communicate mainly by talking, not by writing. Writing can be more painful than talking because writing opens ideas to broader scrutiny and criticism than talking ever can.

On the one hand, talk is cheap, ephemeral, and, often, quixotic. It typically occurs in convivial settings among friends or with good sparring partners. Ideas are wound, unwound, twisted, rewound, transformed, and spun eccentrically at dazzling speeds in ordinary conversation. Persuasion in conversation can depend more on the “sizzle on the steak” (i.e., setting, the status of the speaker, florid theatrics, body language, body odor) than on solid argument.

On the other hand, technical writing is demanding, available permanently for scrutiny once in print, and judged by its logic, persuasiveness, and practicality. It often evolves in solitary, almost monastic, settings. The *word* is the atom of technical writing, on which all is built and all stands or falls. The ideas communicated by assembled words are exhibited naked before their friendly peers and their opponents, who eye them up and down and then attempt to nibble them to tiny, unrecognizable pieces as ducks do to stale crackers.

For many, the mindset conducive to technical writing is unnatural. Successful technical writing requires a critical, disputatious approach to topics. Such an approach is alien to many people and requires honing and diligent practice. It is far easier on your workload and interpersonal relationships to be known as a believer rather than a doubter. However, a skeptical, “show me” attitude serves a technical writer well, for the truth with a capital “T,” not the affect around it, is the prize.

IN CONCLUSION, SOME ADVICE

Gene Fowler, an American, author, and dramatist, once wrote. “Writing is easy: All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.” Acknowledge the stunning reality: Writing is hard work. OK, now, get started. A serious scholar pursues technical writing competence persistently, without apology, and without timidity until the game is called on account of darkness.