

Technical Writing Skills

Lesson 6

**IF DOOR DOES
NOT OPEN
DO NOT
ENTER**

NO PERSON SHALL, ON A FRIDAY, SATURDAY
OR SUNDAY THE DAY PRECEEDING A
PUBLIC HOLIDAY, OR ON A PUBLIC HOLIDAY,
DRIVE OR CAUSE TO BE DRIVEN BETWEEN
THE HOURS OF 6 P.M. AND MIDNIGHT. A
MOTOR VEHICLE WHICH EXCEEDS 10.5 M
IN LENGTH IN ALL MAIN ROADS





© ALISDAIR MACDONALD

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lecture you should be able to:

- Revise poorly worded sentences for clarity and conciseness.
- Focus sentences on their real subjects and verbs.
- Edit your writing for meaningless words and expressions.

The 5 'C's of Technical Communication

Clarity: To be clear so that understanding is easy.

Conciseness: To be brief or to the point without losing the intent of your message.

Concreteness: To be definite, not abstract, real, complete.

Coherence: To be easily understood, consistent.

Context: To consider your scope and your audience, and the effect of your message on your readers.

Clarity and Conciseness

Example

Also reviewed was the root barrier installation on the upper roof decks, which was progressing during our inspection. It was observed that the root barrier was installed; however, correction of the irrigation scuppers and waterproofing of the anchor back plates was not carried out.

Clarity and Conciseness

Revision steps to make your writing direct, clear, and concise:

- Find the real subject
- Find the real verb
- Edit for conciseness
- Edit for clarity

Clarity and Conciseness

Sentences usually work best when:

- The sentence subject also defines the topic of the sentence.
- The subject appears at the start of the sentence.

Find the Real Subject

Rule #1: Be as direct as possible.

~~The purchase of the new machine~~ would improve quality control.

The new machine would improve quality control.

Find the Real Subject

~~The presence of the unidentified gene~~ was detected last week.

The unidentified gene was detected last week.

Pro Tip: Whenever possible, make the subject a real person or something concrete.

Find the Real Subject

Rule #2: Avoid meaningless sentence starts.

~~There are~~ many factors that led to the motor damage.

Many factors led to the motor damage.

Find the Real Subject

Okay: It is not expected that we pay immediately.

Better: We are not expected to pay immediately.

Best: We don't need to pay immediately.

Pro Tip: Try to avoid starting sentences with “there are” and “it is” unless they refer to something specific you have mentioned earlier (antecedent).

Find the Real Subject

Rule #3: Use the active voice.

In the **active voice**, the subject is the person or thing that does the action expressed in the sentence.

Example

Smith Construction won the contract for the highway project.

Find the Real Subject

In the **passive voice**, the grammatical subject is the recipient of the action expressed in the sentence:

Example

The contract for the highway project was won by Smith Construction.

Activity #1

Find the Real Verb

~~An analysis~~ of the sample was undertaken.

The sample was analyzed.

~~An investigation~~ of the different options was ~~performed~~.

The different options were investigated.

Pro Tip: Look for words with **-tion**, **-ment**, and **-sis** and see if you can change them into a verb.

Edit for Conciseness

To be clear and easy to understand, sentences should be short.

Rule #1: Avoid wordy expressions.

~~at this point in time~~ = now

~~due to the fact that~~ = Because

~~in the event that~~ = if



<http://www.ifunny.com/pictures/product-contains-peanuts/>

Edit for Conciseness

Rule #2: Avoid redundancies

We used ~~already~~ existing technologies.

We won't proceed at ~~the present~~ time.

If the symptoms ~~still~~ persist, call me.

Edit for Clarity

Rule #1: Break up chains of nouns.

The deadline for the municipal groundwater level investigation completion report is Monday morning.

The deadline for the completion report on the investigation into the municipal groundwater table is Monday morning.

The completion report on the investigation into the municipal groundwater table is due on Monday morning.

Edit for Clarity

Rule #2: Use simple words.

pertaining to = about

necessitate = need

utilize = use

in the course of = during

Edit for Clarity

Rule #3: Avoid jargon and slang.

The resources are selected, so that timelines can be met for the deliverables.

Pro Tip: Technical jargon can be useful, but only when your audience is certain to understand your meaning.

Edit for Clarity

Rule #4: Watch out for misplaced and dangling modifiers.

A modifier is a word or phrase that describes some other word in the sentence.

Examples

Please notice the instructions in Part III.

As you leave, stop by the registration area, which is located in the main lobby.

Edit for Clarity

A **misplaced** modifier is one that modifies the wrong part of the sentence.

~~The topic of the meeting is the future of hydroelectric energy in the Red Lion Motel.~~

The topic of the meeting in the Red Lion Motel is the future of hydroelectric energy.

Pro Tip: In general, keep the modifier near the element it modifies.

Edit for Clarity

A **dangling modifier** does not refer to anything in the sentence.

Analyzing the test report, the data sheet looked incorrect.

As I was analyzing the test report, the data sheet looked incorrect.

Analyzing the test report, I thought the data sheet looked incorrect.

Edit for Clarity

Rule #5: Use parallel structure.

We need to order the scanner, purchase the computers, and ~~meeting~~ with the network specialist.

We need to order the scanner, purchase the computers, and meet with the network specialist.

Pro Tip: An **unparallel** presentation can confuse or mislead readers.

Activity #2
