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Editing for Readable Style

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A definition of style**What determines your style****Inefficient style****More efficient****Ways in which style goes wrong**

You might write for a diverse or specific audience, or for experts or non-experts. But no matter how technically appropriate your document, audience needs are not served unless your style is *readable*.

What is *writing style*, and how does it influence user reaction to a document? Your particular writing style is a blend of these elements:

- the way in which you construct each sentence
- the length of your sentences
- the way in which you connect sentences
- the words and phrases you choose
- the tone you convey

Readable sentences require correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. But correctness alone is no guarantee of readability. For example, this response to a job applicant is mechanically correct but inefficient:

We are in receipt of your recent correspondence indicating your interest in securing the advertised position. Your correspondence has been duly forwarded for consideration by the personnel office, which has employment candidate selection responsibility. You may expect to hear from us relative to your application as the selection process progresses. Your interest in the position is appreciated.

Notice how hard you have worked to extract information that could be expressed this simply:

Your application for the advertised position has been forwarded to our personnel office. As the selection process moves forward, we will be in touch. Thank you for your interest.

Inefficient style makes readers work harder than they should.

Style can be inefficient for many reasons, but it is especially inept when it

- makes the writing impossible to interpret
- takes too long to make the point
- reads like a Dick-and-Jane story from primary school
- uses imprecise or needlessly big words
- sounds stuffy and impersonal

Regardless of the cause, inefficient style results in writing that is less informative and less persuasive. Moreover, inefficient style can be unethical—by confusing or misleading the audience.

To help your audience spend less time reading, you must spend more time revising for a style that is *clear, concise, fluent, exact, and likable*.

EDITING FOR CLARITY

A clear sentence requires no more than a single reading. The following suggestions will help you edit for clarity.

amb

AVOID AMBIGUOUS PHRASING. Workplace writing ideally has *one* meaning only and allows for *one* interpretation. Does a person's "suspicious attitude" mean that he is "suspicious" or "suspect"?

AMBIGUOUS All managers are not required to submit reports.

PHRASING (*Are some or none required?*)

REVISED Managers are not all required to submit reports.

or

Managers are not required to submit reports.

AMBIGUOUS Most city workers strike on Friday.

PHRASING

REVISED Most city workers **are planning to strike** on Friday.

or

Most city workers **typically strike** on Friday.

ref

AVOID AMBIGUOUS PRONOUN REFERENCES. Pronouns (*he, she, it, their*, and so on) must clearly refer to the noun they replace.

AMBIGUOUS Our patients enjoy the warm days while **they** last.

REFERENT (*Are the patients or the warm days on the way out?*)

Depending on whether the referent (or antecedent) for *they* is *patients* or *warm days*, the sentence can be clarified.

CLEAR REFERENT While these warm days last, our patients enjoy them.

or

Our terminal patients enjoy the warm days.

AMBIGUOUS Jack resents his assistant because **he** is competitive.

REFERENT (*Who's the competitive one—Jack or his assistant?*)

CLEAR REFERENT Because his assistant is competitive, Jack resents him.

or

Because Jack is competitive, he resents his assistant.

(See Appendix C for more on pronoun references, and page 281 for avoiding sexist bias in pronoun use.)

Avoid Ambiguous Punctuation. A missing hyphen, comma, or other punctuation mark can obscure meaning.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| MISSING HYPHEN | Replace the trailer's inner wheel bearings. (<i>The inner-wheel bearings or the inner wheel-bearings?</i>) |
| MISSING COMMA | Does your company produce liquid hydrogen? If so, how[,] and where do you store it? (<i>Notice how the meaning changes with a comma after "how."</i>) Police surrounded the crowd[,] attacking the strikers. (<i>Without the comma, the crowd appears to be attacking the strikers.</i>) |

A missing colon after *kill* yields the headline “Moose Kill 200.” A missing apostrophe after *Myers* creates this gem: “Myers Remains Buried in Portland.”

EXERCISE 1

Edit each sentence below to eliminate ambiguities in phrasing, pronoun reference, or punctuation.

- a. Call me any evening except Tuesday after 7 o'clock.
- b. The benefits of this plan are hard to imagine.
- c. I cannot recommend this candidate too highly.
- d. Visiting colleagues can be tiring.
- e. Janice dislikes working with Claire because she's impatient.
- f. Our division needs more effective writers.
- g. Tell the reactor operator to evacuate and sound a general alarm.
- h. If you don't pass any section of the test, your flying days are over.
- i. Dial “10” to deactivate the system and sound the alarm.

tel

Avoid Telegraphic Writing. *Function words* signal relationships between the *content words* (nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs) in a sentence. Some examples of function words:

Function words

- articles (*a, an, the*)
- prepositions (*in, of, to*)
- linking verbs (*is, seems, looks*)
- relative pronouns (*who, which, that*)

Some writers mistakenly try to compress their writing by eliminating these function words.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| AMBIGUOUS | Proposal to employ retirees almost dead. |
| REVISED | The proposal to employ retirees is almost dead. |

AMBIGUOUS Uninsulated end pipe ruptured. (*What ruptured? The pipe or the end of the pipe?*)

REVISED The uninsulated end **of the** pipe is ruptured.

or

The uninsulated pipe **on the** end ruptured.

AMBIGUOUS The reactor operator told management several times she expected an accident. (*Did she tell them once or several times?*)

REVISED The reactor operator told management several times **that** she expected an accident.

or

The reactor operator told management **that** several times she expected an accident.

mod

Avoid Ambiguous Modifiers. Modifiers explain, define, or add detail to other words or ideas. If a modifier is too far from the words it modifies, the message can be ambiguous.

MISPLACED MODIFIER Only press the red button in an emergency. (*Does **only** modify **press** or **emergency**?*)

REVISED Press **only** the red button in an emergency.

or

Press the red button in an emergency **only**.

Position modifiers to reflect your meaning.

Another problem with ambiguity occurs when a modifying phrase has no word to modify.

DANGLING MODIFIER Being so well known in the computer industry,
I would appreciate your advice.

The writer meant to say that the *reader* is well known, but with no word to connect to, the modifying phrase dangles. Eliminate the confusion by adding a subject:

REVISED Because **you** are so well known in the computer industry, I would appreciate your advice.

See Appendix C for more on modifiers.

EXERCISE 2

Edit each sentence below to repair telegraphic writing or to clarify ambiguous modifiers.

- a. Replace main booster rocket seal.
- b. The president refused to believe any internal report was inaccurate.
- c. Only use this phone in a red alert.
- d. After offending our best client, I am deeply annoyed with the new manager.
- e. Send memo to programmer requesting explanation.
- f. Do not enter test area while contaminated.

st mod

UNSTACK MODIFYING NOUNS: One noun can modify another (as in “software development”). But when two or more nouns modify a noun, the string of words becomes hard to read (as in “nuclear core containment unit technician safety protection procedures” versus “procedures for protecting the safety of technicians in the nuclear core containment unit”). Besides being confusing, stacked modifiers can also be ambiguous.

AMBIGUOUS Be sure to leave enough time for a **training session participant** evaluation. (*Evaluation of the session or of the participants?*)

Stacked nouns also deaden your style. Bring your style *and* your audience to life by using action verbs (*complete, prepare, reduce*) and prepositional phrases.

REVISED Be sure to leave enough time **for** participants **to evaluate** the training session.

or

Be sure to leave enough time **to evaluate** participants in **the** training session.

No such problem with ambiguity occurs when *adjectives* are stacked in front of a noun.

CLEAR He was a **nervous, angry, confused, but dedicated** employee.

The adjectives clearly modify *employee*.

wo

ARRANGE WORD ORDER FOR COHERENCE AND EMPHASIS: In coherent writing, everything sticks together; each sentence builds on the preceding sentence and looks ahead to the following sentence. Sentences generally work best when the beginning looks back at familiar information and the end provides the new (or unfamiliar) information:

Effective word order

| Familiar | Unfamiliar |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| My dog has fleas. | |
| Our boss just won the lottery. | |
| This company is planning a merger. | |

Besides helping a message stick together, the familiar-to-unfamiliar structure emphasizes the new information. Just as every paragraph has a key sentence, every sentence has a key word or phrase that sums up the new information. That key word or phrase usually is emphasized best when it appears at the end of the sentence.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| FAULTY EMPHASIS | We expect a refund because of your error in our shipment. |
| CORRECT | Because of your error in our shipment, we expect a refund . |
| FAULTY EMPHASIS | In a business relationship, trust is a vital element. |
| CORRECT | A business relationship depends on trust . |

One exception to placing key words last occurs with an imperative statement (a command, an order, an instruction), with the subject [*you*] understood. For instance, each step in a list of instructions should contain an action verb (*insert, open, close, turn, remove, press*). To give readers a forecast, place the verb in that instruction at the beginning.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| CORRECT | Insert the diskette before activating the system. Remove the protective seal. |
|----------------|--|

With the key word at the beginning of the instruction, users know immediately what action they need to take.

EXERCISE 3

Edit each sentence below to unstack modifying nouns or to rearrange the word order for clarity and emphasis.

- a. Develop online editing system documentation.
 - b. We need to develop a unified construction automation design.
 - c. Install a hazardous materials dispersion monitor system.
 - d. I recommend these management performance improvement incentives.
 - e. Our profits have doubled since we automated our assembly line.
 - f. Education enables us to recognize excellence and to achieve it.
 - g. In all writing, revision is required.
 - h. We have a critical need for technical support.
 - i. Sarah's job involves fault analysis systems troubleshooting handbook preparation.
-



Use Active Voice Often. A verb's *voice* signals whether a sentence's subject acts or is acted on. The active voice ("I did it") is more direct, concise, and persuasive than the passive voice ("It was done by me"). In active voice sentences, a clear agent performs a clear action on a recipient:



Consider the ethics of active and passive voice at

www.ablongman.com/hannemanns

| ACTIVE VOICE | <i>Agent</i> Joe | <i>Action</i> lost | <i>Recipient</i> your report. |
|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Subject</i> | <i>Verb</i> | <i>Object</i> | |

Passive voice reverses this pattern, placing the recipient of the action in the subject slot.

| PASSIVE VOICE | <i>Recipient</i> Your report | <i>Action</i> was lost | <i>Agent</i> by Joe. |
|------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Subject</i> | <i>Verb</i> | <i>Object</i> | <i>Prepositional phrase</i> |

Sometimes the passive eliminates the agent altogether:

PASSIVE VOICE Your report was lost. (*Who lost it?*)

Passive voice is unethical if it obscures the person or other agent who performed the action when that responsible person or agent should be identified.

Some writers mistakenly rely on the passive voice because they think it sounds more objective and important. But the passive voice often makes writing wordy, indecisive, and evasive.

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| CONCISE AND DIRECT (ACTIVE) | I underestimated labor costs for this project. (7 words) |
| WORDY AND INDIRECT (PASSIVE) | Labor costs for this project were underestimated by me. (9 words) |
| EVASIVE (PASSIVE) | Labor costs for this project were underestimated. |

Do not evade responsibility by hiding behind the passive voice:

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| EVASIVE (PASSIVE) | A mistake was made in your shipment. (<i>By whom?</i>) It was decided not to hire you. (<i>Who decided?</i>) A layoff is recommended . |
|----------------------|---|

In reporting errors or bad news, use the active voice, for clarity and sincerity.

The passive voice creates a weak and impersonal tone.

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| WEAK AND IMPERSONAL | An offer will be made by us next week. |
|------------------------|---|

STRONG AND PERSONAL **We will make** an offer next week.

Use the active voice when you want action. Otherwise, your statement will have no power.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| WEAK PASSIVE | If my claim is not settled by May 15, the Better Business Bureau will be contacted , and their advice on legal action will be taken . |
| STRONG ACTIVE | If you do not settle my claim by May 15, I will contact the Better Business Bureau for advice on legal action. |

Notice how this active version emphasizes the new and significant information by placing it at the end.

Ordinarily, use the active voice for giving instructions.

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| PASSIVE | The bid should be sealed . Care should be taken with the dynamite. |
| ACTIVE | Seal the bid. Be careful with the dynamite. |

Avoid shifts from active to passive voice in the same sentence.

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| FAULTY SHIFT | During the meeting, project members spoke and presentations were given . |
| CORRECT | During the meeting, project members spoke and gave presentations. |

Unless you have a deliberate reason for choosing the passive voice, prefer the *active* voice for making forceful connections like the one described here:

Why the active voice is preferable

By using the active voice, you direct the reader's attention to the subject of your sentence. For instance, if you write a job application letter that is littered with passive verbs, you fail to achieve an important goal of that letter: to show the readers the important things you have done, and how prepared you are to do important things for them. That strategy requires active verbs, with clear emphasis on *you* and what you have done/are doing. (Pugliano 6)

EXERCISE 4

Convert these passive voice sentences to concise, forceful, and direct expressions in the active voice.

- a. The evaluation was performed by us.
- b. Unless you pay me within three days, my lawyer will be contacted.
- c. Hard hats should be worn at all times.

- d. It was decided to reject your offer.
- e. It is believed by us that this contract is faulty.
- f. Our test results will be sent to you as soon as verification is completed.

pv

USE PASSIVE VOICE SELECTIVELY. Passive voice is appropriate in lab reports and other documents in which the agent's identity is immaterial to the message.

Use the passive when your audience has no need to know the agent.

CORRECT PASSIVE Mr. Jones **was brought** to the emergency room.
The bank failure **was publicized** statewide.

Use the passive voice to focus on events or results when the agent is unknown, unapparent, or unimportant.

CORRECT PASSIVE All memos in the firm **are filed** in a database.
Fred's article **was published** last week.
All policy claims **are kept** confidential.

Prefer the passive when you want to be indirect or inoffensive (as in requesting the customer's payment or the employee's cooperation, or to avoid blaming someone—such as your supervisor) (Ornatowski 94).

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| ACTIVE BUT OFFENSIVE | You have not paid your bill. You need to overhaul our filing system. |
| INOFFENSIVE PASSIVE | This bill has not been paid . Our filing system needs to be overhauled . |

Use the passive voice if the person behind the action needs to be protected.

CORRECT PASSIVE The criminal **was identified**.
The embezzlement scheme **was exposed**.

EXERCISE 5

The sentences below lack proper emphasis because of improper use of the active voice. Convert each to passive voice.

- a. Joe's company fired him.
 - b. Someone on the maintenance crew has just discovered a crack in the nuclear core containment unit.
 - c. A power surge destroyed more than two thousand lines of our new applications program.
 - d. You are paying inadequate attention to worker safety.
 - e. You are checking temperatures too infrequently.
 - f. You did a poor job editing this report.
-

OS

AVOID OVERSTUFFED SENTENCES. A sentence crammed with ideas makes details hard to remember and relationships hard to identify.

OVERSTUFFED Publicizing the records of a private meeting that took place three weeks ago to reveal the identity of a manager who criticized our company's promotion policy would be unethical.

Clear things up by sorting out the relationships.

REVISED In a private meeting three weeks ago, a manager criticized our company's policy on promotion. It would be unethical to reveal the manager's identity by publicizing the records of that meeting. (*Other versions are possible, depending on the writer's intended meaning.*)

Give your readers no more information in one sentence than they can retain and process.

EXERCISE 6

Unscramble this overstuffed sentence by making shorter, clearer sentences.

A smoke-filled room causes not only teary eyes and runny noses but also can alter people's hearing and vision, as well as creating dangerous levels of carbon monoxide, especially for people with heart and lung ailments, whose health is particularly threatened by secondhand smoke.

EDITING FOR CONCISENESS

Two kinds of wordiness

Writing can suffer from two kinds of wordiness: one kind occurs when readers receive information they don't need (think of an overly detailed weather report during local television news). The other kind of wordiness occurs when too many words are used to convey information readers *do* need (as in saying "a great deal of potential for the future" instead of "great potential").

Every word in the document should advance your meaning:

Writing improves in direct ratio to the number of things we can keep out of it that shouldn't be there. (Zinsser 14)

Concise writing conveys the most information in the fewest words. But it does not omit details necessary for clarity.

Use fewer words whenever fewer will do. But remember the difference between *clear writing* and *compressed writing* that is impossible to decipher.

- COMPRESSED** Give new vehicle air conditioner compression cut-off system specifications to engineering manager advising immediate action.
- CLEAR** The cut-off system for the air conditioner compressor on our new vehicles is faulty. Give the system specifications to our engineering manager so they will be modified.

First drafts are rarely concise. Trim the fat.

w

AVOID WORDY PHRASES. Each phrase here can be reduced to one word.

Avoiding wordy phrases

| | |
|------------------------|-----------|
| print out | = print |
| at a rapid rate | = rapidly |
| due to the fact that | = because |
| the majority of | = most |
| readily apparent | = obvious |
| a large number | = many |
| prior to | = before |
| aware of the fact that | = know |
| in close proximity | = near |
| boot up | = boot |

red

ELIMINATE REDUNDANCY. A redundant expression says the same thing twice, in different words, as in *fellow colleagues*.

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| completely eliminate | end result |
| basic essentials | cancel out |
| enter into | consensus of opinion |
| mental awareness | utter devastation |
| mutual cooperation | the month of August |

rep

AVOID NEEDLESS REPETITION. Unnecessary repetition clutters writing and dilutes meaning.

- REPETITIOUS** In trauma victims, breathing is restored by **artificial respiration**. Techniques of **artificial respiration** include mouth-to-mouth **respiration** and mouth-to-nose **respiration**.

Repetition in the above passage disappears when sentences are combined.

- CONCISE** In trauma victims, breathing is restored by artificial respiration, either mouth-to-mouth or mouth-to-nose.

NOTE

Don't hesitate to repeat, or at least rephrase, material (even whole paragraphs in a longer document) if you feel that users need reminders. Effective repetition helps avoid cross-references like these: "See page 23" or "Review page 10."

EXERCISE 7

Make these sentences more concise by eliminating needless phrases, redundancy, and needless repetition.

- a. I have admiration for Professor Jones.
 - b. Due to the fact that we made the lowest bid, we won the contract.
 - c. On previous occasions we have worked together.
 - d. She is a person who works hard.
 - e. We have completely eliminated the bugs from this program.
 - f. This report is the most informative report on the project.
 - g. Through mutual cooperation, we can achieve our goals.
 - h. I am aware of the fact that Sam is trustworthy.
 - i. This offer is the most attractive offer I've received.
-

th

AVOID THERE SENTENCE OPENERS. Many *There is* or *There are* sentence openers can be eliminated.

WEAK **There is** a coaxial cable connecting the antenna to the receiver.

REVISED A coaxial cable connects the antenna to the receiver.

WEAK **There is** a danger of explosion in Number 2 mineshaft.

REVISED Number 2 mineshaft is in danger of exploding.

Dropping these openers places the key words at the end of the sentence, where they are best emphasized.

NOTE

Of course, in some contexts, proper emphasis would call for a There opener.

CORRECT People have often wondered about the rationale behind Boris's sudden decision. There are several good reasons for his dropping out of the program.

It

AVOID SOME IT SENTENCE OPENERS. Avoid beginning a sentence with *It*—unless the *It* clearly points to a specific referent in the preceding sentence: "This document is excellent. *It* deserves special recognition."

WEAK **It** was his bad attitude that got him fired.

REVISED His bad attitude got him fired.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| WEAK | It is necessary to complete both sides of the form. |
| REVISED | Please complete both sides of the form. |

pref

DELETE NEEDLESS PREFACES. Instead of delaying the new information in your sentence, get right to the point.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| WORDY | I am writing this letter because I wish to apply for the position of copy editor. |
| CONCISE | Please consider me for the position of copy editor. |
| WORDY | As far as artificial intelligence is concerned, the technology is only in its infancy. |
| CONCISE | Artificial intelligence technology is only in its infancy. |

EXERCISE 8

Make these sentences more concise by eliminating *There* and *It* openers and needless prefaces.

- a. There was severe fire damage to the reactor.
- b. There are several reasons why Jane left the company.
- c. It is essential that we act immediately.
- d. It has been reported by Bill that several safety violations have occurred.
- e. This letter is to inform you that I am pleased to accept your job offer.
- f. The purpose of this report is to update our research findings.

vv

AVOID WEAK VERBS. Prefer verbs that express a definite action: *open, close, move, continue, begin*. Avoid weak verbs that express no specific action: *is, was, are, has, give, make, come, take*.

NOTE

In some cases, such verbs are essential to your meaning: "Dr. Phillips is operating at 7 a.m." "Take me to the laboratory."

All forms of *to be* (*am, are, is, was, were, will, have been, might have been*) are weak. Substitute a strong verb for conciseness:

| | |
|---------------|--|
| WEAK | My recommendation is for a larger budget. |
| STRONG | I recommend a larger budget. |

Don't disappear behind weak verbs and their baggage of needless nouns and prepositions.

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| WEAK AND WORDY | Please take into consideration my offer. |
| CONCISE | Please consider my offer. |

Strong verbs, or action verbs, suggest an assertive, positive, and confident writer. Here are some weak verbs converted to strong:

**using weak
verbs**

| | |
|------------------------|-------------|
| has the ability to | = can |
| give a summary of | = summarize |
| make an assumption | = assume |
| come to the conclusion | = conclude |
| take action | = act |
| make a decision | = decide |
| make a proposal | = propose |

EXERCISE 9

Edit each of these wordy and vague sentences to eliminate weak verbs.

- Our disposal procedure is in conformity with federal standards.
- Please make a decision today.
- We need to have a discussion about the problem.
- I have just come to the realization that I was mistaken.
- Your conclusion is in agreement with mine.
- This manual gives instructions to end users.

to be

DELETE NEEDLESS TO BE CONSTRUCTIONS. Sometimes the *to be* form itself mistakenly appears behind such verbs as *appears*, *seems*, and *finds*.

WORDY Your product seems **to be** superior.
I consider this employee **to be** highly competent.

prep

AVOID EXCESSIVE PREPOSITIONS. Needless prepositions create wordiness.

WORDY The recommendation first appeared **in** the report written **by** the supervisor in January **about** that month's productivity.

CONCISE The recommendation first appeared in the supervisor's productivity report for January.

Each prepositional phrase here can be reduced.

**reducing
needless
prepositions**

| | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| with the exception of | = except for |
| in reference to | = about (or regarding) |
| in order that | = so |
| in the near future | = soon |
| in the event of | = if |
| at the present time | = now |
| in the course of | = during |
| in the process of | = during (or in) |

nom

FIGHT NOUN ADDICTION. Nouns manufactured from verbs (nominalizations) often accompany weak verbs and needless prepositions.

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| WEAK AND WORDY | We ask for the cooperation of all employees. |
| STRONG AND CONCISE | We ask that all employees cooperate |
| WEAK AND WORDY | Give consideration to the possibility of a career change. |
| STRONG AND CONCISE | Consider a career change. |

Besides causing wordiness, nominalizations can be vague—by hiding the agent of an action. Verbs are generally easier to read because they signal action.

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| WORDY AND VAGUE | A valid requirement for immediate action exists. (<i>Who should take the action? We can't tell!</i>) |
| PRECISE | We must act immediately. |

Here are nominalizations restored to their action verb forms:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Trading nouns for verbs | conduct an investigation of = investigate |
| | provide a description of = describe |
| | conduct a test of = test |
| | make a discovery of = discover |

Nominalizations drain the life from your style. In cheering for your favorite team you wouldn't say "Blocking of that kick is a necessity!" instead of "Block that kick."

NOTE

Also avoid excessive economy. For example, "Employees must cooperate" would not be an acceptable alternative to the first example in this section. But, for the final example, "Block that kick" would be.

EXERCISE 10

Make these sentences more concise by eliminating needless prepositions, *to be* constructions, and nominalizations.

- Igor seems to be ready for a vacation.
- Our survey found 46 percent of users to be disappointed.
- In the event of system failure, your sounding of the alarm is essential.
- These are the recommendations of the chairperson of the committee.
- Our acceptance of the offer is a necessity.
- Please perform an analysis and make an evaluation of our new system.
- A need for your caution exists.
- Power surges are associated, in a causative way, with malfunctions of computers.

neg

MAKE NEGATIVES POSITIVE. A positive expression is easier to understand than a negative one.

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| INDIRECT AND WORDY | Please do not be late in submitting your report. |
| DIRECT AND CONCISE | Please submit your report on time. |

Readers work even harder to translate sentences with multiple negative expressions:

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| CONFUSING AND WORDY | Do not distribute this memo to employees who have not received a security clearance. |
| CLEAR AND CONCISE | Distribute this memo only to employees who have received a security clearance. |

Besides directly negative words (*no, not, never*), some indirectly negative words (*except, forget, mistake, lose, uncooperative*) also force readers to translate.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| CONFUSING AND WORDY | Do not neglect to activate the alarm system. My diagnosis was not inaccurate . |
| CLEAR AND CONCISE | Be sure to activate the alarm system. My diagnosis was accurate . |

The positive versions are more straightforward *and* persuasive.

Some negative expressions, of course, are perfectly correct, as in expressing disagreement.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| CORRECT NEGATIVES | This is not the best plan. Your offer is unacceptable . This project never will succeed. |
|--------------------------|---|

Prefer positives to negatives, though, whenever your meaning allows:

**Reading negatives
for positives**

| | |
|-----------------|-------------|
| did not succeed | = failed |
| does not have | = lacks |
| did not prevent | = allowed |
| not unless | = only if |
| not until | = only when |
| not absent | = present |

cl

CLEAN OUT CLUTTER WORDS. Clutter words stretch a message without adding meaning. Here are some of the most common: *very, definitely, quite, extremely, rather, somewhat, really, actually, currently, situation, aspect, factor*.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| CLUTTERED | Actually, one aspect of a business situation that could definitely make me quite happy would be to have a somewhat adventurous partner who really shared my extreme attraction to risks. |
| CONCISE | I seek an adventurous business partner who enjoys risks. |

qual

DELETE NEEDLESS QUALIFIERS. Qualifiers such as *I feel, it seems, I believe, in my opinion*, and *I think* express uncertainty or soften the tone and force of a statement.

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| APPROPRIATE QUALIFIER | Despite Frank's poor grades last year he will, I think , do well in college. Your product seems to meet our needs. |
|--------------------------|---|

But when you are certain, eliminate the qualifier so as not to seem tentative or evasive.

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| NEEDLESS QUALIFIERS | It seems that I've made an error. We appear to have exceeded our budget. In my opinion , this candidate is outstanding. |
|------------------------|--|

**NOTE**

In communicating across cultures, keep in mind that a direct, forceful style might be considered offensive (page 282).

EXERCISE 11

Make these sentences more concise by changing negatives to positives and by clearing out clutter words and needless qualifiers.

- a. Our design must avoid nonconformity with building codes.
- b. Never fail to wear protective clothing.
- c. Do not accept any bids unless they arrive before May 1.
- d. I am not unappreciative of your help.
- e. We are currently in the situation of completing our investigation of all aspects of the accident.
- f. I appear to have misplaced the contract.
- g. Do not accept bids that are not signed.
- h. It seems as if I have just wrecked a company car.

EDITING FOR FLUENCY

Fluent sentences are easy to read because of clear connections, variety, and emphasis. Their varied length and word order eliminate choppiness and monotony. Fluent sentences enhance *clarity*, emphasizing the most important ideas. Fluent sen-

tences enhance *conciseness*, often replacing several short, repetitious sentences with one longer, more economical sentence. To write fluently, use the following strategies.



COMBINE RELATED IDEAS. A series of short, disconnected sentences is not only choppy and wordy, but also unclear.

DISCONNECTED

Jogging can be healthful. You need the right equipment. Most necessary are well-fitting shoes. Without this equipment you take the chance of injuring your legs. Your knees are especially prone to injury. (5 sentences)

**CLEAR, CONCISE,
AND FLUENT**

Jogging can be healthful if you have the right equipment. Shoes that fit well are most necessary because they prevent injury to your legs, especially your knees. (2 sentences)

Most sets of information can be combined to form different relationships, depending on what you want to emphasize. Imagine that this set of facts describes an applicant for a junior management position with your company.

- Roy James graduated from an excellent management school.
- He has no experience.
- He is highly recommended.

Assume that you are a personnel director, conveying your impression of this candidate to upper management. To convey a negative impression, you might combine the facts in this way:

**STRONGLY NEGATIVE
EMPHASIS**

Although Roy James graduated from an excellent management school and is highly recommended, **he has no experience**.

The *independent* idea (in boldface) receives the emphasis. (See also page 757 on subordination.) But if you are undecided, yet leaning in a negative direction, you might write:

**STRONGLY NEGATIVE
EMPHASIS**

Roy James graduated from an excellent management school and is highly recommended, **but** he has no experience.

In this sentence, the ideas before and after *but* are both independent. Joining them with the coordinating word *but* suggests that both sides of the issue are equally important (or “coordinate”). Placing the negative idea last, however, gives it slight emphasis. (See also page 756 on coordination.)

Finally, to emphasize strong support for the candidate, you could say:

Although Roy James has no experience, **he graduated from an excellent management school and is highly recommended.**

Here, the earlier idea is subordinated by *although*, leaving the two final ideas independent.

Caution: Combine sentences only to simplify the reader's task. Overstuffed sentences with too much information and too many connections can be hard for readers to sort out.

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| OVERSTUFFED | Our night supervisor's verbal order from upper management to repair the overheated circuit was misunderstood by Leslie Kidd, who gave the wrong instructions to the emergency crew, thereby causing the fire within 30 minutes. |
| CLEARER | Upper management issued a verbal order to repair the overheated circuit. When our night supervisor transmitted the order to Leslie Kidd, it was misunderstood. Kidd gave the wrong instruction to the emergency crew, and the fire began within 30 minutes. |

Research indicates that most people can retain between fifteen and twenty-five words at one time (Boyd 18). But even short sentences can be hard to interpret if they include too many details.

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| OVERSTUFFED | Send three copies of Form 17-e to all six departments, unless Departments A or B or both request Form 16-w instead. |
|--------------------|---|

var

VARY SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION AND LENGTH. Related ideas often need to be linked in one sentence, so that readers can grasp the connections:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| DISCONNECTED | The nuclear core reached critical temperature. The loss-of-coolant alarm was triggered. The operator shut down the reactor. |
| CONNECTED | As the nuclear core reached critical temperature, triggering the loss-of-coolant alarm, the operator shut down the reactor. |

But an idea that should stand alone for emphasis needs a whole sentence of its own:

CORRECT Core meltdown seemed inevitable.

However, an unbroken string of long or short sentences can bore and confuse readers, as can a series with identical openings:

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| BORING AND REPETITIVE | There are some drawbacks about diesel engines. They are difficult to start in cold weather. They cause vibration. They also give off an unpleasant odor. They cause sulfur dioxide pollution. |
| VARIED | Diesel engines have some drawbacks. Most obvious are their noisiness, cold-weather starting difficulties, vibration, odor, and sulfur dioxide emission. |

Similarly, when you write in the first person, overusing *I* makes you appear self-centered. (Some organizations require use of the third person, avoiding the first person completely, for all manuals, lab reports, specifications, product descriptions, and so on.)

Do not, however, avoid personal pronouns if they make the writing more readable (say, by eliminating passive constructions).

short

USE SHORT SENTENCES FOR SPECIAL EMPHASIS. All this talk about combining ideas might suggest that short sentences have no place in good writing. Wrong. Short sentences (even one-word sentences) provide vivid emphasis. They stick in a reader's mind.

EXERCISE 12

Combine each set of sentences below into one fluent sentence that provides the requested emphasis.

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| SENTENCE SET | John is a loyal employee. John is a motivated employee. John is short-tempered with his colleagues. |
| COMBINED FOR POSITIVE EMPHASIS | Even though John is short-tempered with his colleagues, he is a loyal and motivated employee. |
| SENTENCE SET | This word processor has many features. It includes a spelling checker. It includes a thesaurus. It includes a grammar checker. |
| COMBINED TO EMPHASIZE THESAURUS | Among its many features, such as spelling and grammar checkers, this word processor includes a thesaurus. |

- a. The job offers an attractive salary.
It demands long work hours.
Promotions are rapid.
(Combine for negative emphasis.)

- b. The job offers an attractive salary.
It demands long work hours.
Promotions are rapid.
(Combine for positive emphasis.)
- c. Our office software is integrated.
It has an excellent database management program.
Most impressive is its word-processing capability.
It has an excellent spreadsheet program.
(Combine to emphasize the word processor.)
- d. Company X gave us the lowest bid.
Company Y has an excellent reputation.
(Combine to emphasize Company Y.)
- e. Superinsulated homes are energy efficient.
Superinsulated homes create a danger of indoor air pollution.
The toxic substances include radon gas and urea formaldehyde.
(Combine for a negative emphasis.)
- f. Computers cannot think for the writer.
Computers eliminate many mechanical writing tasks.
They speed the flow of information.
(Combine to emphasize the first assertion.)



13.2

See a list of online
word finder
resources at
[www.ablongman.com/
lat10nweb](http://www.ablongman.com/lat10nweb)

Situations in
which people
often hide behind
language

FINDING THE EXACT WORDS

Too often, language can *camouflage* rather than communicate. People see many reasons to hide behind language, as when they

- speak for their company but not for themselves
- fear the consequences of giving bad news
- are afraid to disagree with company policy
- make a recommendation some readers will resent
- worry about making a bad impression
- worry about being wrong
- pretend to know more than they do
- avoid admitting a mistake, or ignorance

Inflated and unfamiliar words, borrowed expressions, and needlessly technical terms camouflage meaning. Poor word choices produce inefficient and often unethical writing that resists interpretation and frustrates the audience.

Following are strategies for finding words that are *convincing, precise, and informative*.



USE SIMPLE AND FAMILIAR WORDING. Don't replace technically precise words with nontechnical words that are vague or imprecise. Don't write *a part that makes*

the computer run when you mean *central processing unit*. Use the precise term, and define it in a glossary for nontechnical readers:

| | |
|----------------|--|
| GLOSSARY ENTRY | Central processing unit: the part of the computer that controls information transfer and carries out arithmetic and logical instructions. |
|----------------|--|

Certain technical words may be indispensable in certain contexts, but the nontechnical words usually can be simplified. Instead of *answering in the affirmative*, use *say yes*; instead of *endeavoring to promulgate* a new policy, *try to announce* it.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| UNFAMILIAR WORDS | Acoustically attenuate the food consumption area. |
| REVISED | Soundproof the cafeteria. |

Don't use three syllables when one will do. Generally, trade for less:

Trading multiple
syllables for
fewer

| | |
|--------------------|---------------|
| demonstrate | = show |
| endeavor | = effort, try |
| frequently | = often |
| initiate | = begin |
| is contingent upon | = depends on |
| multiplicity of | = many |
| subsequent to | = after |
| utilize | = use |

Whenever possible, choose words you use and hear in everyday speaking.

Don't write *Keep me apprised* instead of *Keep me informed*, *I concur* instead of *I agree*, *securing employment* instead of *finding a job*, or *it is cost prohibitive* instead of *we can't afford it*.

Besides being annoying, needlessly big or unfamiliar words can be *ambiguous*.

| | |
|------------------|--|
| AMBIGUOUS | Make an improvement in the clerical situation. |
|------------------|--|

Should we hire more clerical personnel or better personnel or should we train the personnel we have? Words chosen to impress readers too often confuse them instead. A plain style is more persuasive because "it leaves no one out" (Cross 6).

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| PLAIN ENGLISH NEEDED | Avoid prolix nebulosity. |
| REVISED | Don't be wordy and vague. |

Of course, now and then the complex or more elaborate word best expresses your meaning. For instance, we would not substitute *end* for *terminate* in referring to something with an established time limit.

CORRECT Our trade agreement terminates this month.

If a complex word can replace a handful of simpler words—and can sharpen your meaning—use it.

WEAK Six rectangular grooves **around the outside edge** of the steel plate **are needed for** the pressure clamps **to fit into**

INFORMATIVE AND PRECISE Six rectangular grooves on the steel plate **perimeter accommodate** the pressure clamps.

WEAK We need a **one-to-one exchange of ideas and opinions**.

INFORMATIVE AND PRECISE We need a **dialogue**.

EXERCISE 13

Edit these sentences for straightforward and familiar language.

- a. May you find luck and success in all endeavors.
- b. I suggest you reduce the number of cigarettes you consume.
- c. Within the copier, a magnetic reed switch is utilized as a mode of replacement for the conventional microswitches that were in use on previous models.
- d. A good writer is cognizant of how to utilize grammar in a correct fashion.
- e. I will endeavor to ascertain the best candidate.
- f. In view of the fact that the microscope is defective, we expect a refund of our full purchase expenditure.
- g. I wish to upgrade my present employment situation.

jarg

When jargon is appropriate

When jargon is inappropriate

AVOID USELESS JARGON. Every profession has its own shorthand and accepted phrases and terms. For example, *stat* (from the Latin “statim” or “immediately”) is medical jargon for *Drop everything and deal with this emergency*. For computer buffs, a *glitch* is a momentary power surge that can erase the contents of internal memory; a *bug* is an error that causes a program to run incorrectly. Such useful jargon conveys clear meaning to a knowledgeable audience.

Jargon can be useful when you are communicating with specialists. But some jargon is useless in any context. In the world of useless jargon, people don’t *cooperate* on a project; instead, they *interface* or *contiguously optimize their efforts*. Rather than *designing a model*, they *formulate a paradigm*. Instead of *observing limits* or *boundaries*, they *function within specific parameters*.

A popular form of useless jargon is adding *-wise* to nouns, as shorthand for *reference to* or *in terms of*.

USELESS JARGON **Expensewise** and **schedulewise**, this plan is unacceptable.

REVISED In terms of expense and scheduling, this plan is unacceptable.

Writers create another form of useless jargon when they invent verbs from nouns or adjectives by adding an *-ize* ending: Don't invent *prioritize* from *priority*; instead use *to rank priorities*.

Useless jargon's worst fault is that it makes the person using it seem stuffy and pretentious:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| PRETENTIOUS | Unless all parties interface synchronously within given parameters, the project will be rendered inoperative. |
| POSSIBLE TRANSLATION | Unless we coordinate our efforts, the project will fail. |

Beyond reacting with frustration, readers often conclude that useless jargon is camouflage for a writer with something to hide.

Before using any jargon, think about your specific audience and ask yourself: "Can I find an easier way to say exactly what I mean?" Use jargon only if it *improves* your communication.

NOTE

If your employer insists on needless jargon or elaborate phrasing, then you have little choice. What is best in matters of style is not always what some people consider appropriate. Use the style your employer or organization expects, but remember that most documents that achieve superior results use plain English.

acr.

USE ACRONYMS SELECTIVELY. Acronyms are another form of specialized shorthand, or jargon. They are formed from the first letters of words in a phrase (as in *LOCA* from *loss of coolant accident*) or from a combination of first letters and parts of words (as in *bit* from *binary digit* or *pixel* from *picture element*).

Computer technology has spawned countless acronyms, including:

ISDN = Integrated Services Digital Network

Telnet = Telephone Network

URL = Uniform Resource Locator

Acronyms *can* communicate concisely—but only when the audience knows their meaning, and only when you use the term often in your document. Whenever you first use an acronym, spell out the words from which it is derived.

An acronym defined

Modem ("modulator + demodulator"): a device that converts, or "modulates," computer data in electronic form into a sound signal that can be transmitted via phone line and then reconverted, or "demodulated," into electronic form for the receiving computer.

NOTE

To identify virtually any acronym, consult the acronym-finder site at Norway's University of Oslo <www.habrok.uio.no/cgi-bin/acronymis>.

trite

AVOID TRITENESS. Writers who rely on worn-out phrases (*clichés*) such as the following come across as either too lazy or too careless to find exact, unique ways of saying what they mean.

Worn out phrases

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| make the grade | the chips are down |
| in the final analysis | not by a long shot |
| close the deal | last but not least |
| hard as a rock | welcome aboard |
| water under the bridge | over the hill |
| holding the bag | bite the bullet |
| up the creek | work like a dog |

EXERCISE 14

Edit these sentences to eliminate useless jargon and triteness.

- a. For the obtaining of the X-33 word processor, our firm will have to accomplish the disbursement of funds to the amount of \$6,000.
- b. To optimize your financial return, prioritize your investment goals.
- c. The use of this product engenders a 50-percent repeat consumer encounter.
- d. We'll have to swallow our pride and admit our mistake.
- e. We wish to welcome all new managers aboard.
- f. Managers who make the grade are those who can take daily pressures in stride.

euph

AVOID MISLEADING EUPHEMISMS. A form of understatement, euphemisms are expressions aimed at politeness or at making unpleasant subjects seem less offensive. Thus, *we powder our nose* or *use the boys' room* instead of *using the bathroom*; *we pass away* or *meet our Maker* instead of *dying*.

When a euphemism is appropriate

When euphemisms avoid offending or embarrassing people, they are perfectly legitimate. Instead of telling a job applicant he or she is *unqualified*, we might say *Your background doesn't meet our needs*. In addition, there are times when friendliness and interoffice harmony are more likely to be preserved with writing that is not too abrupt, bold, blunt, or emphatic (MacKenzie 2).

Euphemisms, however, are unethical if they understate the truth when only the truth will serve. In the sugarcoated world of misleading euphemisms, bad news disappears:

When a euphemism is deceptive

- Instead of being *laid off* or *fired*, workers are *surplused* or *deselected*, or the company is *downsized*.
- Instead of *lying* to the public, the government *engages in a policy of disinformation*.
- Instead of *wars* and *civilian casualties*, we have *conflicts* and *collateral damage*.

Language loses all meaning when *criminals* become *offenders*, when *mistakes* become *teachable moments*, and when people who are just plain *lazy* become

underachievers. Plain talk is always better than deception. If someone offers you a job with *limited opportunity for promotion*, expect a *dead-end job*.

over

Avoid Overstatement. Exaggeration sounds phony. Be cautious when using words such as *best*, *biggest*, *brightest*, *most*, and *worst*.

OVERSTATED **Most** businesses have **no** loyalty toward their employees.

REVISED **Some** businesses have **little** loyalty toward their employees.

OVERSTATED You will find our product to be the **best**.

REVISED You will **appreciate the high quality** of our product.

Be aware of the vast differences in meaning among these words:

Qualify your generalizations

| | |
|------|-----------|
| few | rarely |
| some | sometimes |
| many | often |
| most | usually |
| all | always |

Unless you specify *few*, *some*, *many*, or *most*, people can interpret your statement to mean *all*.

MISLEADING Assembly-line employees are doing shabby work.

Unless you mean *all*, qualify your generalization with *some*, or *most*—or even better, specify *20 percent*.

EXERCISE 15

Edit these sentences to eliminate euphemism, overstatement, or unsupported generalizations.

- a. I finally must admit that I am an abuser of intoxicating beverages.
- b. I was less than candid.
- c. This employee is poorly motivated.
- d. Most entry-level jobs are boring and dehumanizing.
- e. Clerical jobs offer no opportunity for advancement.
- f. Because of your absence of candor, we can no longer offer you employment.

ww

Avoid Imprecise Wording. Even words listed as synonyms can carry different shades of meaning. Do you mean to say *I'm slender*, *You're slim*, *She's lean*, or *He's scrawny*? The wrong choice could be disastrous.

TABLE 13.1
Commonly
Confused
Words



Find online lists of often misused words at
www.ablongman.com/commonwds

| Similar Words | Used Correctly in a Sentence |
|---|--|
| <i>Affect</i> means “to have an influence on.” <i>Affect</i> can also mean “to pretend.” <i>Effect</i> used as a noun means “a result.” <i>Effect</i> used as a verb means “to make happen” or “to bring about.” | Meditation positively <i>affects</i> concentration. Boris likes to <i>affect</i> a French accent. Meditation has a positive <i>effect</i> on concentration. Meditation can <i>effect</i> an improvement in concentration. |
| <i>Already</i> means “before this time.” <i>All ready</i> means “prepared.” | Our new laptops are <i>already</i> sold out. We are <i>all ready</i> for the summer tourist season. |
| <i>Among</i> refers to three or more. <i>Between</i> refers to two. | The prize was divided <i>among</i> the four winners. The prize was divided <i>between</i> the two winners. |
| <i>Continual</i> means “repeated at intervals.” <i>Continuous</i> means “without interruption.” | Our lower field floods <i>continually</i> during the rainy season. His headache has been <i>continuous</i> for three days. |
| <i>Differ from</i> refers to unlike things. <i>Differ with</i> means “to disagree.” | This plan <i>differs</i> greatly <i>from</i> our earlier one. Mary <i>differs with</i> John about the feasibility of this project. |
| <i>Disinterested</i> means “unbiased” or “impartial.” <i>Uninterested</i> means “not caring.” | Good science calls for <i>disinterested</i> analysis of research findings. Junior high school students are often <i>uninterested</i> in science. |
| <i>Eminent</i> means “famous” or “distinguished.” <i>Inminent</i> means “about to happen.” | Dr. Ostroff, the <i>eminent</i> physicist, is lecturing today. A nuclear meltdown seemed <i>imminent</i> . |
| <i>Farther</i> refers to physical distance (a measurable quantity). <i>Further</i> refers to extent (not measurable). | The station is 20 miles <i>farther</i> . Further discussion of this issue is vital. |
| <i>Fewer</i> refers to things that can be counted. <i>Less</i> refers to things that can't be counted. | <i>Fewer</i> than fifty students responded to our survey. This survey had <i>less</i> of a response than our earlier one. |
| <i>Imply</i> means “to hint at” or “to insinuate.” <i>Infer</i> means “to reason from evidence.” | This report <i>implies</i> that a crime occurred. From this report, we can <i>infer</i> that a crime occurred. |
| <i>It's</i> stands for “it is.” <i>Its</i> stands for “belonging to.” | <i>It's</i> a good time for a department meeting. The cost of the project has exceeded <i>its</i> budget. |

| Similar Words | Used Correctly in a Sentence |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Lay</i> means "to place or set something down." It always takes a direct object.</p> <p><i>Lie</i> means "to recline." It takes no direct object.</p> <p>(Note that the past tense of <i>lie</i> is <i>lay</i>.)</p> | <p>Please <i>lay</i> the blueprints on the desk.</p> <p>This patient needs to <i>lie</i> on his right side all night.</p> <p>The patient <i>lay</i> on his right side all last night.</p> |
| <p><i>Phenomena</i> is the plural form of <i>phenomenon</i>.</p> <p><i>Phenomenon</i> is the singular form.</p> | <p>Many scientific <i>phenomena</i> remain unexplained.</p> <p>Tiger Woods continues to be a golfing <i>phenomenon</i>.</p> |
| <p><i>Precede</i> means "to come before."</p> <p><i>Proceed</i> means "to go forward."</p> | <p>Audience analysis should <i>precede</i> a written report.</p> <p>If you must wake the cobra, <i>proceed</i> carefully.</p> |
| <p><i>Principle</i> is always a noun that means "basic rule or standard."</p> <p><i>Principal</i>, used as a noun, means "the major person(s)."</p> <p><i>Principal</i>, used as an adjective, means "leading."</p> | <p>Ethical <i>principles</i> should govern all our communications.</p> <p>All <i>principals</i> in this purchase must sign the contract.</p> <p>Martha was the <i>principal</i> negotiator for this contract.</p> |

Be on the lookout for imprecisely phrased (and therefore illogical) comparisons.

IMPRECISE Your bank's interest rate is higher than BusyBank. (Can a rate be higher than a bank?)

PRECISE Your bank's interest rate is higher than BusyBank's.

Imprecision can create ambiguity. For instance, is *send us more personal information* a request for more information that is personal or for information that is more personal? Does your client expect *fewer* or *less* technical details in your report?

Precision ultimately enhances conciseness, when one exact word replaces multiple inexact words.

WORDY AND LESS EXACT I have **put together** all the financial information.
Keep doing this exercise for ten seconds.

CONCISE AND MORE EXACT I have **assembled** all the....
Continue this exercise....

spec

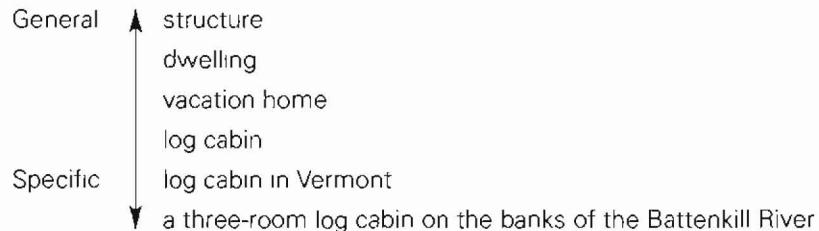
BE SPECIFIC AND CONCRETE: General words name broad classes of things, such as *job*, *computer*, or *person*. Such terms usually need to be clarified by more specific ones.

General terms
traded for
specific terms

| | |
|----------|--|
| job | = senior accountant for Softbyte Press |
| computer | = Macintosh PowerBook G3 |
| person | = Sarah Jones, production manager |

The more specific your words, the sharper your meaning.

How the level of
generality affects
writing's visual
quality



Notice how the picture becomes more vivid as we move to lower levels of generality. To visualize your way of seeing, and your exact meaning, readers need specifics.

Abstract words name qualities, concepts, or feelings (*beauty, luxury, depression*) whose exact meaning has to be nailed down by *concrete* words—words that name things we can visualize.

Abstract terms
traded for
concrete terms

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| a beautiful view | = snowcapped mountains, a wilderness lake, pink granite ledge, ninety-foot birch trees |
| a luxurious condominium | = imported tiles, glass walls, oriental rugs |
| a depressed worker | = suicidal urge, insomnia, feelings of worthlessness, no hope for improvement |

Informative writing *tells* and *shows*.

GENERAL One of our **workers** was **injured** by a **piece of equipment recently**.

The boldface words only *tell* without showing.

SPECIFIC Alan Hill suffered a **broken thumb** while working on a **lathe yesterday**.

Choose informative words that express exactly what you mean. Don't write *thing* when you mean *lever, switch, micrometer, or disk*.

NOTE

In some instances, of course, you may wish to generalize for the sake of diplomacy. Instead of writing “Bill, Mary, and Sam have been tying up the office phones with personal calls,” you might prefer to generalize: “Some employees . . . have been. . . .” The second version gets your message across without pointing the finger.

Analogy vs.
comparison

When you can, provide solid numbers and statistics that get your point across:

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| GENERAL | In 1972, thousands of people were killed or injured on America's highways. Many families had at least one relative who was a casualty. After the speed limit was lowered to 55 miles per hour in late 1972, the death toll began to drop. |
| SPECIFIC | In 1972, 56,000 people died on America's highways; 200,000 were injured; 15,000 children were orphaned. In that year, if you were a member of a family of five, chances are that someone related to you by blood or law was killed or injured in an auto accident. After the speed limit was lowered to 55 miles per hour in late 1972, the death toll dropped steadily to 41,000 in 1975. |

NOTE

Most good writing offers both general and specific information. The most general material appears in the topic statement and sometimes in the conclusion because these parts, respectively, set the paragraph's direction and summarize its content.

EXERCISE 16

Edit these sentences to make them more precise and informative.

- a. Our outlet does more business than Chicago.
 - b. Anaerobic fermentation is used in this report.
 - c. Loan payments are due bimonthly.
 - d. Your crew damaged a piece of office equipment.
 - e. His performance was admirable.
 - f. This thing bothers me.
-

Analogy versus
comparison

USE ANALOGIES TO SHARPEN THE IMAGE. Ordinary comparison shows similarities between two things of *the same class* (two computer keyboards, two methods of cleaning dioxin-contaminated sites). Analogy, on the other hand, shows some essential similarity between two things of *different classes* (writing and computer programming, computer memory and post office boxes).

Analogy is good for emphasizing a point (*Some rain is now as acidic as vinegar*). They are especially useful in translating something abstract, complex, or unfamiliar, as long as the easier subject is broadly familiar to readers. Analogy therefore calls for particularly careful analyses of audience.

Analogy can save words and convey vivid images. *Collier's Encyclopedia* describes the tail of an eagle in flight as "spread like a fan." The following sentence from a description of a trout feeder mechanism uses an analogy to clarify the positional relationship between two working parts:

ANALOGY The metal rod is inserted (and centered, **crosslike**) between the inner and outer sections of the clip.

Without the analogy *crosslike*, we would need something like this to visualize the relationship:

MISSING ANALOGY The metal rod is inserted, **perpendicular to the long plane and parallel to the flat plane**, between the inner and outer sections of the clip.

Besides naming things, analogies help *explain* things. This next analogy helps clarify an unfamiliar concept (dangerous levels of a toxic chemical) by comparing it to something more familiar (human hair).

ANALOGY A dioxin concentration of 500 parts per trillion is lethal to guinea pigs. One part per trillion is roughly equal to the thickness of a human hair compared to the distance across the United States. (*Congressional Research Report 15*)

tone

ADJUSTING YOUR TONE

How tone is created

Your tone is your personal stamp—the personality that takes shape between the lines. The tone you create depends on (1) the distance you impose between yourself and the reader, and (2) the attitude you show toward the subject.

Assume, for example, that a friend is going to take over a job you've held. You're writing your friend instructions for parts of the job. Here is your first sentence:

Informal

Now that you've arrived in the glamorous world of office work, put on your track shoes; this is no ordinary manager-trainee job.

This sentence imposes little distance between you and the reader (it uses the direct address, *you*, and the humorous suggestion to *put on your track shoes*). The ironic use of *glamorous* suggests just the opposite: that the job holds little glamor.

For a different reader (say, the recipient of a company training manual), you would have chosen some other opening:

Semiformal

As a manager trainee at GlobalTech, you will work for many managers. In short, you will spend little of your day seated at your desk.

The tone now is serious, no longer intimate, and you express no distinct attitude toward the job. For yet another audience (clients or investors who will read an annual report), you might alter the tone again:

Formal

Manager trainees at GlobalTech are responsible for duties that extend far beyond desk work.

Here the businesslike shift from second- to third-person address makes the tone too impersonal for any document addressed to the trainees themselves.

We already know how tone works in speaking. When you meet someone new, for example, you respond in a tone that defines your relationship:

Tone announces interpersonal distance

Honored to make your acquaintance. [*formal tone—greatest distance*]
How do you do? [*formal*]
Nice to meet you. [*semiformal—medium distance*]
Hello. [*semiformal*]
Hi. [*informal—least distance*]
What's happening? [*informal—slang*]

Each of these greetings is appropriate in some situations, inappropriate in others. Whichever tone you decide on, be consistent throughout your document.

**INCONSISTENT
TONE**

My office isn't fit for a pig [*too informal*]: it is ungraciously unattractive [*too formal*].

REVISED

The shabbiness of my office makes it an unfit place to work.

In general, lean toward an informal tone without using slang.

In addition to setting the distance between writer and reader, your tone implies your *attitude* toward the subject and the reader.

Tone announces attitude

We dine at seven.
Dinner is at seven.
Let's eat at seven.
Let's chow down at seven.
Let's strap on the feedbag at seven.
Let's pig out at seven.

The words you choose tell readers a great deal about where you stand.

One problem with tone occurs when your attitude is unclear. Say *I enjoyed the fiber optics seminar* instead of *My attitude toward the fiber optics seminar was one of high approval*. Say *Let's liven up our dull relationship* instead of *We should inject some rejuvenation into our lifeless liaison*.

In writing a memo about an upcoming meeting to review the reader's job evaluation, would you invite this person to *discuss* the evaluation, *talk it over*, *have a chat*, or *chew the fat*? Decide how casual or serious your attitude should be. Use the following strategies for making your tone conversational and appropriate.

GUIDELINES for Deciding about Tone

1. Use a formal or semiformal tone in writing for superiors, professionals, or academics (depending on what you think the reader expects).
2. Use a semiformal or informal tone in writing for colleagues and subordinates (depending on how close you feel to your reader).
3. Use an informal tone when you want your writing to be conversational, or when you want it to sound like a person talking.
4. Above all, find out what tone your particular readers prefer.

USE AN OCCASIONAL CONTRACTION. Unless you have reason to be formal, use (but do not overuse) contractions. Balance an *I am* with an *I'm*, a *you are* with a *you're*, and *it is* with an *it's*.

MISSING CONTRACTION Do not be wordy and vague.
REVISED Don't be wordy and vague.

Use contractions only with pronouns, not with nouns or proper nouns (names).

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| AWKWARD CONTRACTIONS | Barbara'll be here soon. Health's important. |
| AMBIGUOUS CONTRACTIONS | The dog's barking. Bill's skiing. |

These ambiguous contractions could be confused with possessive constructions.

NOTE *The contracted version often sounds less emphatic than the two-word version—for example, “Don’t handle this material without protective clothing” versus “Do not handle this material without protective clothing.” If your message requires emphasis, you should not use a contraction.*

ADDRESS READERS DIRECTLY. Use the personal pronouns *you* and *your* to connect with readers.

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| IMPERSONAL TONE | Students at our college will find the faculty always willing to help. |
| PERSONAL TONE | As a student at our college, you will find the faculty always willing to help. |

Readers relate better to something addressed to them directly.

NOTE *Use *you* and *your* only to correspond directly with the reader, as in a letter, memo, instructions, or some form of advice, encouragement, or persuasion. By using *you* and *your* in a situation that calls for first or third person, you might write something like this:*

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| WORDY AND AWKWARD | <i>When you are in northern Ontario, you can see wilderness lakes everywhere around you.</i> |
| APPROPRIATE | <i>Wilderness lakes are everywhere in northern Ontario.</i> |

EXERCISE 17

The sentences below suffer from pretentious language, unclear expression of attitude, missing contractions, or indirect address. Adjust the tone.

- a. Further interviews are a necessity to our ascertaining the most viable candidate.
 - b. Do not submit the proposal if it is not complete.
 - c. Employees must submit travel vouchers by May 1.
 - d. Persons taking this test should use the HELP option whenever they need it.
 - e. I am not unappreciative of your help.
 - f. My disapproval is far more than negligible.
-

USE *I* AND *We* WHEN APPROPRIATE. Instead of disappearing behind your writing, use *I* or *We* when referring to yourself or your organization.

| | |
|---------|---------------------------------|
| DISTANT | The writer would like a refund. |
| REVISED | I would like a refund. |

A message becomes doubly impersonal when both writer and reader disappear.

| | |
|------------|---|
| IMPERSONAL | The requested report will be sent next week. |
| PERSONAL | We will send the report you requested next week. |

PREFER THE ACTIVE VOICE. Because the active voice is more direct and economical than the passive voice, it generally creates a less formal tone. (Review pages 250–52 for use of active and passive voice.)

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| PASSIVE AND IMPERSONAL | Travel expenses cannot be reimbursed unless receipts are submitted. |
| ACTIVE AND PERSONAL | We cannot reimburse your travel expenses unless you submit receipts. |

EXERCISE 18

These sentences have too few *I* or *We* constructions or too many passive constructions. Adjust the tone.

- a. Payment will be made as soon as an itemized bill is received.
- b. You will be notified.
- c. Your help is appreciated.

ON THE JOB...

Revising a document

"Deadlines affect how we approach the writing process. With plenty of time, we can afford the luxury of the whole process: careful decisions about audience, purpose, content, organization, and style—and plenty of revisions. At times, we have to take shortcuts."

—Blair Cordasco, Training Specialist
for an international bank

How tone can be too informal

Avoid an Overly Informal Tone. We generally do not write in the same way we would speak to friends at the local burger joint or street corner. Achieving a conversational tone does not mean lapsing into substandard usage, slang, profanity, or excessive colloquialisms. *Substandard usage* ("He ain't got none," "I seen it today," "She brang the book") ignores standards of educated expression. *Slang* ("hurling," "belted," "bogus," "bummed") usually has specific meaning only for members of a particular in-group. *Profanity* ("This idea sucks," "pissed off," "What the hell") not only displays contempt for the audience but also triggers contempt for the person using it. *Colloquialisms* ("O.K.," "a lot," "snooze," "in the bag") are understood more widely than slang, but tend to appear more in speaking than in writing.

How tone can offend

Tone is offensive when it violates the reader's expectations: when it seems disrespectful, tasteless, distant and aloof, too "chummy," casual, or otherwise inappropriate for the topic, the reader, and the situation.

When to use an academic tone

A formal or academic tone is appropriate in countless writing situations: a research paper, a job application, a report for the company president. In a history essay, for example, you would not refer to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as "those dudes, George and Abe." Whenever you begin with rough drafting or brainstorming, your tone might be overly informal and is likely to require some adjustment during subsequent drafts.

But while slang usually is inappropriate in school or workplace writing, some situations (say, certain email messages) call for a measure of informality. The occasional colloquial expression helps soften the tone of any writing.

bias

Avoid Personal Bias. If people expect an impartial report, try to keep your own biases out of it. Imagine, for instance, that you have been sent to investigate the

- d. Our reply to your bid will be sent next week.
- e. Your request will be given our consideration.
- f. My opinion of this proposal is affirmative.
- g. This writer would like to be considered for your opening.

EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE. Whenever you offer advice, suggestions, or recommendations, try to emphasize benefits rather than flaws.

CRITICAL TONE

Because of your division's lagging productivity, a management review may be needed.

ENCOURAGING TONE

A management review might help boost productivity in your division.

A fact...

A place...

A base...

causes of an employee-management confrontation at your company's Omaha branch. Your initial report, written for the New York central office, is intended simply to describe what happened. Here is how an unbiased description might read:

A factual account

At 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday, January 21, eighty women employees set up picket lines around the executive offices of our Omaha branch, bringing business to a halt. The group issued a formal protest, claiming that their working conditions were repressive, their salary scale unfair, and their promotional opportunities limited. The women demanded that the company's hiring and promotional policies and wage scales be revised. The demonstration ended when Garvin Tate, vice president in charge of personnel, promised to appoint a committee to investigate the group's claims and to correct any inequities.

Notice the absence of implied judgments; the facts are presented objectively. A less impartial version of the event, from a protestor's point of view, might read like this:

A biased version

Last Tuesday, sisters struck another blow against male supremacy when eighty women employees paralyzed the company's repressive and sexist administration for more than six hours. The timely and articulate protest was aimed against degrading working conditions, unfair salary scales, and lack of promotional opportunities for women. Stunned executives watched helplessly as the group organized their picket lines, determined to continue their protest until their demands for equal rights were addressed. An embarrassed vice president quickly agreed to study the group's demands and to revise the company's discriminatory policies. The success of this long-overdue confrontation serves as an inspiration to oppressed women employees everywhere.

Judgmental words (*male supremacy, degrading, paralyzed, articulate, stunned, discriminatory*) inject the writer's attitude, even though it isn't called for. In contrast to this bias, the following version patronizingly defends the status quo:

A biased version

Our Omaha branch was the scene of an amusing battle of the sexes last Tuesday, when a group of irate feminists, eighty strong, set up picket lines for six hours at the company's executive offices. The protest was lodged against supposed inequities in hiring, wages, working conditions, and promotion for women in our company. The radicals threatened to surround the building until their demands for "equal rights" were met. A bemused vice president responded to this carnival demonstration with patience and dignity, assuring the militants that their claims and demands—however inaccurate and immoderate—would receive just consideration.

Again, qualifying adjectives and superlatives slant the tone.

Being unbiased, of course, doesn't mean remaining "neutral" about something you know to be wrong or dangerous (Kremers 59). If, for instance, you conclude that the Omaha protest was clearly justified, say so.

sexist

AVOID SEXIST USAGE. Sexist usage refers to doctors, lawyers, and other professionals as *he* or *him*, while referring to nurses, secretaries, and homemakers as *she* or *her*. In this traditional stereotype, males do the jobs that really matter and that pay higher wages, whereas females serve only as support and decoration. When females do invade traditional "male" roles, we might express our surprise at their boldness by calling them *female executives*, *female sportscasters*, *female surgeons*, or *female hockey players*. Likewise, to demean males who work in occupations that were traditionally seen as "female," we sometimes refer to *male secretaries*, *male nurses*, *male flight attendants*, or *male models*.

**offen**

AVOID OFFENSIVE USAGE OF ALL TYPES. Enlightened communication respects all people in reference to their specific cultural, racial, ethnic, and national background; sexual and religious orientation; age or physical condition. References to individuals and groups should be as neutral as possible; no matter how inadvertent, any expression that seems condescending or judgmental or that violates the reader's sense of appropriateness is offensive. Detailed guidelines for reducing biased usage appear in these two works:

Schwartz, Marilyn, et al. *Guidelines for Bias-Free Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.

EXERCISE 19

The sentences below suffer from negative emphasis, excessive informality, biased expressions, or offensive usage. Adjust the tone.

- a. If you want your workers to like you, show sensitivity to their needs.
 - b. By not hesitating to act, you prevented my death.
 - c. The union has won its struggle for a decent wage.
 - d. The group's spokesman demanded salary increases.
 - e. Each employee should submit his vacation preferences this week.
 - f. While the girls played football, the men waved pom-poms.
 - g. Aggressive management of this risky project will help you avoid failure.
 - h. The explosion left me blind as a bat for nearly an hour.
 - i. This dude would be an excellent employee if only he could learn to chill out.
-

GUIDELINES for Nonsexist Usage

1. Use neutral expressions.

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| chair , or chairperson | rather than | chairman |
| businessperson | rather than | businessman |
| supervisor | rather than | foreman |
| postal worker | rather than | postman |
| homemaker | rather than | housewife |
| humanity , or humankind | rather than | mankind |
| actor | rather than | actor vs. actress |

2. Rephrase to eliminate the pronoun, but only if you can do so without altering your original meaning.

SEXIST A writer will succeed if **he** revises.

REVISED A writer who revises succeeds.

3. Use plural forms.

SEXIST A writer will succeed if **he** revises.

REVISED Writers will succeed if **they** revise (but not A writer will succeed if **they** revise).

When using a plural form, don't create an error in pronoun-referent agreement by having the *plural* pronoun *they* or *their* refer to a *singular* referent (as in *Each writer* should do *their* best).

4. When possible (as in direct address) use *you*: *You will succeed if you revise*. But use this form *only* when addressing someone directly. (See page 276.)5. Use occasional pairings (*him* or *her*, *she* or *he*, *his* or *hers*): *A writer will succeed if she or he revises*. But note that overuse of such pairings can be awkward: *A writer should do his or her best to make sure that he or she connects with his or her readers*.6. Drop diminutive endings such as *-ess* and *-ette* used to denote females (*poetess*, *drum majorette*, *actress*).7. Use *Ms.* instead of *Mrs.* or *Miss*, unless you know that person prefers one of the traditional titles. Or omit titles completely: *Roger Smith and Jane Kelly; Smith and Kelly*.

8. In quoting sources that have ignored present standards for nonsexist usage, consider these options:

- Insert [sic] ("thus" or "so") following the first instance of sexist terminology in a particular passage.
- Use ellipses to omit sexist phrasing.
- Paraphrase instead of quoting directly.

GUIDELINES for Inoffensive Usage

Below is a sampling of suggestions adapted from the works listed above:



13.4

Politically correct or necessary sensitivity? Consider the debate at <www.ablongman.com/linnenweb>

- When referring to members of a particular culture, be as specific as possible about that culture's identity: Instead of *Latin American* or *Asian* or *Hispanic*, for instance, prefer *Cuban American* or *Korean* or *Nicaraguan*. Instead of *American workforce*, specify *U.S. workforce* when referring to the United States.

Avoid judgmental expressions: Instead of *third-world* or *undeveloped nations* or the *Far East*, prefer *developing* or *newly industrialized nations* or *East Asia*. Instead of *nonwhites*, refer to *people of color*.

- When referring to someone who has a disability, avoid terms that could be considered pitying or overly euphemistic, such as *victims*, *unfortunates*, *challenged*, or *differently abled*. Focus on the individual instead of the disability: Instead of *blind person* or *amputee*, refer to a *person who is blind* or a *person who has lost an arm*.

Avoid expressions that demean those who have medical conditions: *retard*, *mental midget*, *insane idea*, *lame excuse*, *the blind leading the blind*, *able-bodied workers*, and so on.

- When referring to members of a particular age group, prefer *girl* or *boy* for people of age fourteen or under; *young person*, *young adult*, *young man*, or *young woman* for those of high-school age; and *woman* or *man* for those of college age. (*Teenager* or *juvenile* carries certain negative connotations.) Instead of *the elderly*, prefer *older persons*.

EXERCISE 20

Find examples of overly euphemistic language (such as "chronologically challenged") or of insensitive language. Discuss your examples in class.



13.5

For more on cross-cultural and global communication visit <www.ablongman.com/linnenweb>

CONSIDERING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

The style guidelines in this chapter apply specifically to standard English in North America. But technical communication is a global process: Practices and preferences differ widely among various cultures.

Certain cultures might prefer long sentences and technical language, to convey an idea's full complexity. Other cultures value expressions of respect, politeness, praise, and gratitude more than clarity or directness (Hein 125–26; Mackin 349–50).

Writing in non-English languages tends to be more formal than in English, and may rely heavily on the passive voice (Weymouth 144). French readers, for ex-

ample, may prefer an elaborate style that reflects sophisticated and complex modes of thinking. In contrast, our “plain English,” conversational style might connote simple-mindedness, disrespect, or incompetence (Thrush 277).

Documents may originate in English but then be translated into other languages. In such cases, writers must be careful to use English that is easy to translate. Analogies, idioms, and humor are often difficult for translators.

Also, in translation or in a different cultural context, certain words carry offensive or unfavorable connotations. For example, certain cultures use “male” and “female” in referring only to animals (Coe, “Writing for Other Cultures” 17). Other notable disasters (Gesteland 20; Victor 44):

- The Chevrolet *Nova*—meaning “doesn’t go” in Spanish
- The Finnish beer *Koff*—for an English-speaking market
- Colgate’s *Cue* toothpaste—an obscenity in French
- A brand of bicycle named *Flying Pigeon*—imported for a U.S. market

Idioms (“strike out,” “ground rules”) hold no logical meaning for other cultures. Slang (“bogus,” “fat city”) and colloquialisms (“You bet,” “Gotcha”) can strike readers as being too informal and crude.

Offensive writing (including inappropriate humor) can alienate audiences—toward you and your culture (Sturges 32).

ON THE JOB...

Revising a document

“For short pieces, I outline in my head, draft, and revise. On my first draft of a short piece, I spend 40 to 50 percent of the time on the first one or two paragraphs and crank out the rest quickly. Then I revise two or three times, and tinker with the mechanics and format right up until printing. I usually don’t bother to make a printout until I’m pretty close to a final product.”

—Bill Trippe, Communications Specialist
for a military contract company



13.6

For more on
ethics in technical
communication visit
[www.ablongman.com/
ethicsweb](http://www.ablongman.com/
ethicsweb)

Situations in
which word
choice has ethical
or legal
consequences

LEGAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF WORD CHOICE

Chapter 5 (page 85) discusses how workplace writing is regulated by laws against libel, deceptive advertising, and defective information. One common denominator among these violations resides in imprecise or inappropriate word choice. We are all accountable for the words we use—intentionally or not—in framing the audience’s perception and understanding.

- *Assessing risk.* Is the investment you are advocating “a sure thing” or merely “a good bet,” or even “risky”? Are you announcing a “caution,” a “warning,” or a “danger”? Should methane levels in mineshaft #3 “be evaluated” or do “they pose a definite explosion risk”? Never underestimate the risks.

- *Offering a service or product.* Are you proposing to “study the problem” or “explore solutions to the problem” or “eliminate the problem”? Do you “stand behind” your product or do you “guarantee” it? Never promise more than you can deliver.
- *Giving instructions.* Before inserting the widget between the grinder blades, should I “switch off the grinder” or “disconnect the grinder from its power source” or “trip the circuit breaker,” or do all three? Triple-check the clarity of your instructions.
- *Comparing your product with competing products.* Instead of referring to a competitor’s product as “inferior” or “second-rate” or “substandard,” talk about your own “first-rate product” that “exceeds (or meets) standards.” Never run down the competition.
- *Evaluating an employee* (T. Clark, “Teaching Students” 75–76). In a personnel evaluation, don’t refer to the employee as a “troublemaker” or as “unprofessional,” or “too abrasive” or “too uncooperative” or “incompetent” or “too old” for the job. Focus on the specific requirements of this job, and offer *factual* instances in which these requirements, or standards, have been violated: “Our monitoring software recorded five visits by this employee to X-rated Web sites during working hours.” Or “This employee arrives late for work on average twice weekly, has failed to complete assigned projects on three occasions, and has difficulty working with others.” Instead of expressing personal judgments, offer the facts. Be sure everyone involved knows exactly what the standards are well beforehand. Otherwise, you risk violating federal laws against discrimination and you invite costly libel or antidiscrimination suits.

ON THE JOB...

Revising a document

“I usually have to just send it out there due to the fast pace of working in a crisis setting. Can’t even use white out . . . have to cross things out so that they can be seen, because they are legal documents.”

—Emma Bryant, social worker

The limits of automation

words, needless prefaces and qualifiers, overly technical language, jargon, sexist language, and so on. With an online dictionary or thesaurus, you can check definitions or see a list of synonyms for a word you have written.

But these editing aids can be extremely imprecise. For example, both “its” and “it’s” are spelled correctly, but only one of them means “it is.” Your spell checker is great for words that are spelled incorrectly—but not for words that are *used* incorrectly such as “their,” “they’re,” and “there” or for typos that create the wrong but correctly spelled word such as “howl” or “fort” instead of “how” or “for.” Likewise,

USING AUTOMATED EDITING TOOLS EFFECTIVELY

Many of the strategies in this chapter could be executed rapidly with word-processing software. By using the *global search and replace function*, you can command the computer to search for ambiguous pronoun references, overuse of passive voice, *to be* verbs, *There* and *It* sentence openers, negative constructions, clutter



13.7

For more on writing lists as resource links

grammar checkers are great for helping you spot a possible problem, but don't rely only on what the software tells you. For example, not every sentence that the grammar checker flags as "long" should be shortened. These tools simply can't eliminate the writer's burden of *choice*.

Also, none of the rules offered in this chapter applies universally. Ultimately, your own sensitivity to meaning, emphasis, and tone—the human contact—will determine the effectiveness of your writing style.

EXERCISE 21

Try the grammar/style function of your word-processing program. First, look for problems with clarity, conciseness, and fluency yourself. Then compare your changes with those the computer suggests. If the computer contradicts your own judgment, ask a classmate for feedback. If the computer suggests changes that seem ungrammatical or incorrect, consult a good handbook for confirmation. Try to assess when and how the grammar function can be useful and when you can revise best on your own.

For class discussion, prepare a list of the advantages and disadvantages of your automated grammar checker. Use your grammar/style checker on the first two sentences from Exercises 1–10 in this chapter. Are the suggested changes correct? Which of the topics covered in this chapter does the checker miss?

EXERCISE 22

Do a Web search to find an online style and grammar source and, in a one-page memo for classmates, describe the major types of help the site offers.

SAMPLE SITES (Do not limit yourself to these):

Purdue Online Writing Lab—Offers all sorts of writing help.

<www.owl.english.purdue.edu/introduction.html>.

Grammar and Style Notes—Articles cover usage and style.

<www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/writing/>.

Writer's Workshop Online Writing Guide—Includes a basic grammar and usage handbook. <www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/mainmenu.html>.

Elements of Style—An online version of the classic text.

<www.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/strunk/>.

Plain English Network—Advice for achieving user-friendly style.

<www.plainlanguage.gov>.

EXERCISE 23

Go to the *University of Victoria's Writer's Guide* <<http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/>>. Use the Table of Contents page to locate the section on *Audience and Tone*. Locate one item of information about audience and tone (or voice) not covered in this chapter. Take careful notes for a brief discussion of this information in class. Attach a copy of the relevant Web page(s) to your written notes.



13.7

For more online
writing labs and
resource links visit
longman.com/
Longman