# Technical Documentation Style Guide

Last updated: March 2, 2025

**Audience:** Technical Writers

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# Purpose

This style guide offers technical writers editorial standards to produce clear, concise, and consistent documentation tailored for engineers, architects, contractors, and construction professionals.

# General

**Acronyms & Abbreviations**

Acronyms and abbreviations are intended to save readers time. However, if incorrectly used, they can compromise clarity and accessibility.

When using acronyms or abbreviations, follow the practices below:

- Write out the full term on its first use, followed by the acronym or abbreviation in parentheses.
  - Ex. *"The American Institute of Architects (AIA) sets industry standards."*
- Use the acronym or abbreviation consistently after introducing it.
- Avoid unnecessary or unrelated acronyms.
- Limit the number of acronyms in a sentence.

### Active Voice

Whenever possible, use an active voice. Active voice is clearer and more direct, while passive voice can make it harder to identify who is performing the action.

- **Write:** *"The contractor installed the foundation."*
- **Do not write:** *"The foundation was installed by the contractor."*

**Exceptions:** Use passive voice only when the subject is unknown, irrelevant, or when emphasizing the action rather than the actor. See examples below:

| Situation | Example | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| Unknown Subject | *"The report was completed on time."* | It's unclear who submitted the plans. |
| Irrelevant Subject | *"The building was inspected for safety compliance."* | The focus is on the inspection, not on who performed it. |
| Emphasizing the Action | *"The foundation was poured overnight to meet the project deadline."* | The emphasis is on the action of pouring the foundation, not the person doing it. |

### Contractions

Contractions are informal and should **not** be used in technical documents. Therefore, always spell out the full words to maintain clarity and professionalism.

- **Write:** *you are, you will, do not*
- **Do not write:** *you're, you'll, don't*

### Person (Point of View)

In most cases, write as though you are speaking to the reader by using the **second person** (you, your).

- **Write:** *"Make sure you have all necessary tools before starting the project."*
- **Do not write:** *"We should make sure we have all necessary tools before starting the*

- **Do not write:** *"One should make sure they have all necessary tools before starting the project."*

When telling the reader to perform an action, "you" is implied and does not need to be explicitly stated.

- **Write:** *"Check your concrete mix for consistency."*
- **Do not write:** *"You should check your concrete mix for consistency."*

**Exceptions:** In some contexts, addressing the reader directly may not be appropriate. Instead, using either first person or third person is preferred. See examples below:

| Perspective | Context/Usage | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| First Person | Use when the organization is speaking as a collective voice. | *"At our company, we deliver durable and high-quality products."* <br> *"For more information, contact our Communications team."* |
| Third Person | Use in formal standards, reports, or compliance documents that require a neutral and impersonal tone. | *"Contractors must verify the concrete mix temperature before beginning the pour."* <br> *"The concrete was tested prior to placement."* |

# Punctuation

Follow standard U.S. English punctuation rules, as outlined by the [Chicago Manual of Style](). For general best practices, see the table below:

| Punctuation Type | How to Use | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Serial (Oxford) Comma | For a series of items of three or more, use a comma before the "and" or "or." | *"Ensure the cement, water, and aggregate are mixed properly."* |
| Semicolon | Avoid semicolons unless separating items in a complex list. | *"Safety gear includes hard hats, worn at all times; gloves, rated for heavy duty; boots, steel-toed for protection."* |
| Colon | Use a colon to introduce a list or explanation. Use lowercase letters after colons in running text. | *"The required tools are: hammer, level, and saw."* |
| Quotation Marks | Place commas and periods inside closing quotation marks. Use single quotation marks (' ') for quotes within quotes. | *"The manager said, 'Finish your project by the deadline.'"* |

# Formatting

## Dates

Use the following format: month dd, yyyy.

- Ex. March 1, 2025

## Images

Use images (diagrams, screenshots, or graphics) only when they enhance understanding of complex information. Avoid using them for simple workflows or to replace clear text explanations.

Refer to the best practices below:

- Use images with high-quality resolution. Do not use blurry images.
- For diagrams, use SVG files if possible. If not, use PNG.
- Do not reveal personal identifiable information (PII).
- For screenshots, only include UI elements that are relevant to the content.
- Do not use images or screenshots of text – write out the text instead.

## Lists

For guidance on using various types of lists, reference the table below.

| List Type | When to Use | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Numbered list | Use for sequential information or processes. | *"How to Pour Concrete Slab:*<br>1. *Prepare the site.*<br>2. *Build the form.*<br>3. *Mix and pour the concrete.*<br>4. *Level the surface.*<br>5. *Allow the concrete to cure."* |
| Bulleted list | Use when items in your list do not need to appear in a particular order. | *"Here is a list of essential safety gear:*<br>● *Hard hats*<br>● *Safety glasses*<br>● *Safety gloves*<br>● *Ear plugs*<br>● *Steel-toed boots"* |

## Numbers

Spell out numbers in the following cases:

| Category | Example |
|---|---|
| General numbers (one through ten) | *"Five workers arrived."* |
| Numbers at the beginning of a sentence. | *"Six engineers attended the meeting."* |
| Approximate numbers | *"Thousands of products were sold."* |
| Ordinal numbers (first through tenth) | *"The third layer was applied."* |

Use numerals in the following cases:

| Category | Example |
|---|---|
| General numbers (11 and greater) | *"There were 15 trucks."* |
| Measurements | *"The beam is 5 ft long."* |
| Prices | *"$10.99"* or *"$5"* |
| Fractions & Decimals | *"2 ½ inches"* or *"0.75"* |
| Ordinal numbers (11th and greater) | *"12th edition"* |

### Time

Use the 12-hour clock format with hours and minutes, followed by "AM" or "PM" with a space in between.

- Ex. 5:30 PM

# Search Optimization

### Keywords

For online content, incorporate relevant keywords to improve search engine visibility. Choose specific, focused terms over broad, general ones.

Place keywords early and throughout your text in key locations, including:

- Title
- Heading
- Subheading
- Page description
- Overview

- Introduction
- Paragraph bodies
- Alt text for images

**Links**

Enhance readability and assist search engines in crawling and indexing your site by adding links to relevant internal and/or external pages.

For best practices, review Google's [guidelines](#).