How to Achieve Grammatical Correctness in Technical Writing

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Accuracy is the most important trait of all business writing, but it is absolutely critical to **technical writing**. Any weakness, including terrible grammar or prose, can be as serious as communicating inaccurate information.

In fact, poor grammar can lead to misunderstandings and misconstrued meanings. Let's take a look at how to ensure that you have a grammatically sound technical document and become a stronger technical writer.

Achieving grammatical correctness in technical writing

Technical communication has three specific considerations with regards to grammatical correctness, no matter the document type.

Passive voice

The passive voice is often frowned upon in business writing because it is a denser, more complex, and less direct verb structure. That said, it can be appropriate and necessary when conveying scientific or technical information. It can be a tricky verb structure to get right, especially for non-native speakers, so let's look at a few examples.

Ensure that the lid has been replaced correctly before blending the ingredients.

The underlined section is an example of the appropriate use of the passive voice in instructions. It sounds better than saying "*Ensure that you have replaced the lid correctly*" or "*Ensure someone has replaced the lid correctly*", both of which show the active voice in the underlined section.

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"*...the lid has been replaced correctly before blending the ingredients*" is in the passive voice because the subject of the clause, the lid, is RECEIVING the action. In an active sentence or clause, the subject is DOING the action. More info on using the passive voice in business writing **here.**

The general rule for the passive voice is that you have to add an extra BE in the correct tense and change the original verb to the past participle.

In the **present tense**, here's what that looks like:

Active - *I eat cheese every day.*

Passive - *Cheese is eaten by me every day.*

In the **past tense**, it looks like this:

Active - *I submitted the report to Tom.*

Passive - *The report was submitted to Tom by me.*

In the **present perfect**, it gets even more complicated:

Active - *We have seen this type of conflict unfold before.*

Passive - *This type of conflict has been seen unfold before by us.*

You can see the pattern of adding an extra be in the correct tense (you can see a list of all verb tenses **here**). In all of the above examples, the active voice is clearly better for business and technical writing. But, let's look at some examples in which the passive voice is clearly better.

In the **present tense**:

Active - *Next, someone slices the oranges in half.*

Passive - *Next, the oranges are sliced in half.*

Passive voice is better in this example of technical writing because it doesn't matter who slices the oranges in this assumed list of actions.

In the **past tense**:

Active - *Someone submitted the report on time.*

Passive - *The report was submitted on time.*

Again, passive voice is better because it doesn't matter or is unclear who submitted it, and it is more important that it was on time.

In the **present perfect**, we can see the original example:

Active - *Ensure that someone has replaced the lid correctly before blending the ingredients.*

Passive - *Ensure that the lid has been replaced correctly before blending the ingredients.*

Remember, we are only looking at the underlined clause.

Ensuring that you know how and when to use the passive voice correctly will help you achieve grammatical correctness in your technical writing.

Commands and directions

The next quirk of technical writing is that it often contains a lot of commands and directions. When writing commands, the subject is implied (*you*) and not stated in the sentence. For example,

(You) Press the power button on the tower.

(You) Turn on the monitor by pressing the button on the bottom left of the screen.

(You) Enter your credentials.

Linguistically, we call these commands. In technical writing, they are often thought of as instructions, directions, or procedures. Regardless of what they are called, it's important to recognize that the subject of the sentence (*you*) is implied, especially if you are a non-native speaker of English working in an English-speaking technical field. This simple understanding will help you understand how to ensure that you have grammatical correctness in your technical writing in the English language.

Bullets and lists

Technical writing often relies heavily on bulleted or numbered lists. Making sure that your lists are **punctuated correctly** will help you achieve grammatical accuracy and avoid a common grammar error.

Another key point is that all lists should have a lead-in statement that contextualizes every point on the list. This lead-in statement should end in a colon and again, it must contextualize EVERY point on the list. For example,

Every employee must:

- *Wash their hands regularly.*
- *Wear a well-fitting face mask.*
- *Take their temperature daily.*

In the example above, every bullet completes the lead-in sentence in a grammatically correct way. This is a key part of achieving grammatical correctness in technical writing in which lists and bullets are used consistently.

You can find more suggestions on how to create a better bulleted list **here**.

General grammar suggestions

As with all business writing and academic writing, you should NOT rely on your own eyes to find and fix grammatical mistakes. You should also follow the proper rules of grammar with the right tools:

- Use a program like Microsoft Editor or Grammarly.com to achieve correct grammar and correct spelling.
- Use Hemingwayapp.com to check for use of the passive voice and see if you can reduce it.
- Visit the Purdue Online Writing Lab to understand grammatical terms better.
- Ensure that your document aligns with any internal or industry standards.
- Have someone else review your document if possible, or leave time between the final drafting and editing to find incorrect grammar.

As with any business writing, accuracy in technical writing is critical, and achieving correct grammar is part of that accuracy. Our **technical writing course** helps you become a stronger technical writer, use compelling language, and achieve correct writing without grammatical errors.

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