Style in technical writing
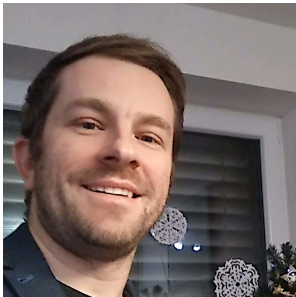
Technical writing course MUNI 2023

The Red Hat Customer Content Services team

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0 normal profile pictures

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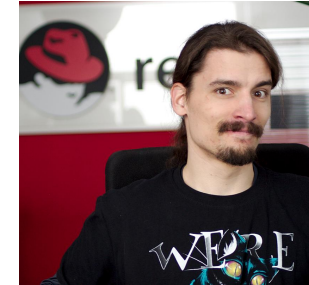Studies and English for students of IT
creative cafe nomad

Jocelyn Sese

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- [What is style?](#)
- [Goals of tech writing](#)
  - [Accessibility](#)
  - [Readability](#)
  - [Findability](#)
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Discord

https://discord.gg/2pnCgYze

What is style in technical writing?

Style makes a difference!

The allowerasing flag allows one to erase installed packages to resolve dependencies, hence it remediates dnf commands in situations where dnf'ing would not have been otherwise possible.

Style makes a difference!

needs visual differentiation

needlessly sophisticated

not established terminology

The **allowerasing** flag allows **one** to **erase** installed packages to resolve

can be 2 shorter sentences

needlessly sophisticated

just repeats the name, stylistically awkward

dependencies, **hence** it **remediates** **dnf** commands **in situations** where

needlessly sophisticated

needs visual differentiation or capitalization

dnf'ing **would not have been** **otherwise** possible.

redundant

vague use case

jargon

redundant

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Style makes a difference!

Using the **`--allowerasing`** option, you can delete installed packages to resolve dependencies. If you encounter a "*Broken dependencies*" error, using **`--allowerasing`** might fix it.

Style makes a difference!

simple, user-focused language
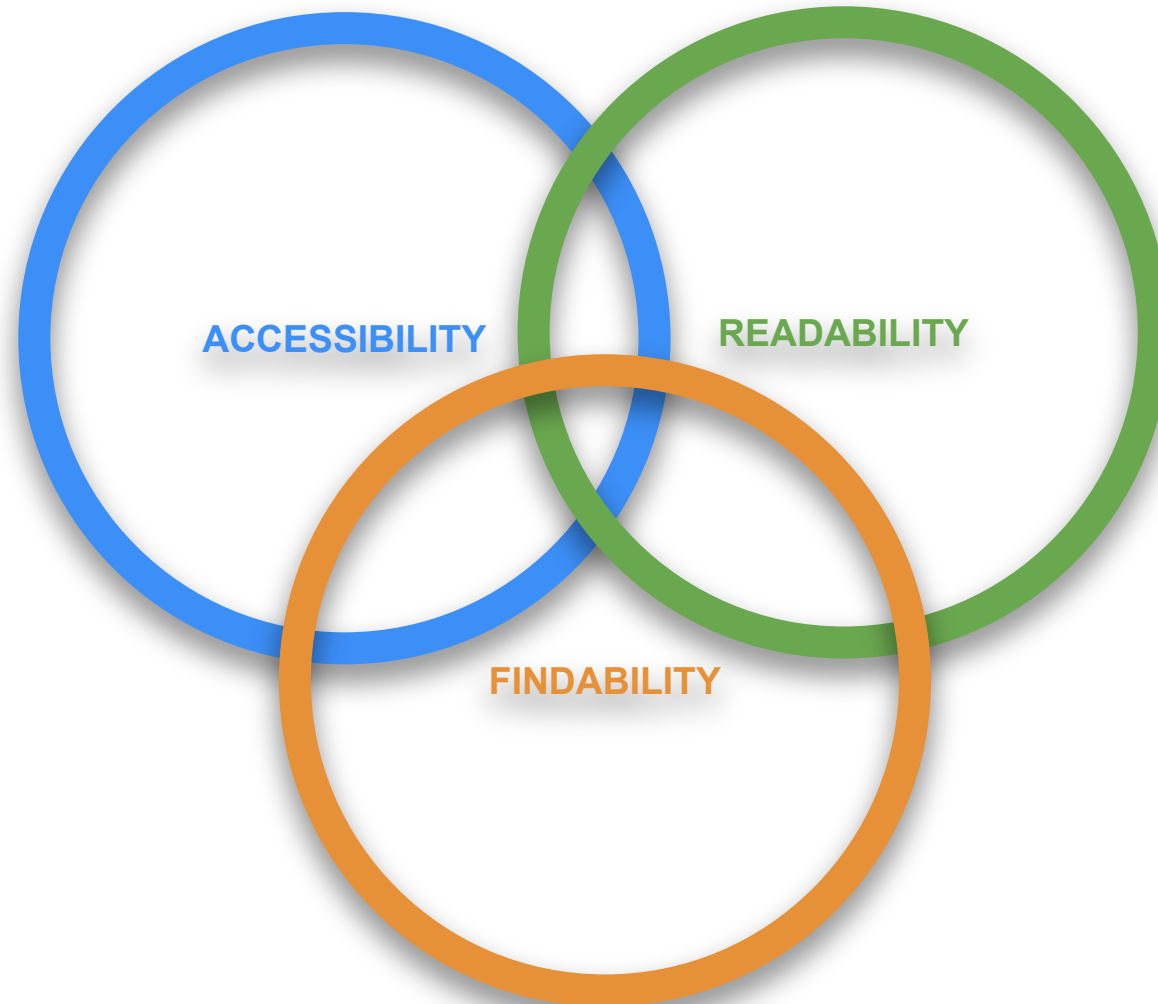
short, easily comprehensible sentences

Using the **--allowerasing** option, you can delete installed packages to resolve dependencies. If you encounter a *"Broken dependencies"* error, using **--allowerasing** might fix it.

specific use case

visually distinct literal values

Goals of technical writing

ACCESSIBILITY

READABILITY

FINDABILITY

"The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect."

- Tim Berners-Lee, W3C Director and inventor of the World Wide Web

Accessibility

- Info should be accessible to anyone regardless of:
  - Levels of English
  - Screen readers
  - Disabilities
  - Stress
- Easily localized, machine translated
- It's the law (ADA, EAA)

Source:
w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility
ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1202
ada.gov/resources/web-guidance/
chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/web-disability-simulator/olioanlbgbpmdlgjnnampnnlohigkjla

"Case studies show that accessible websites have better search results, reduced maintenance costs, and increased audience reach, among other benefits."
- w3.org

Make docs more accessible

- 3 Cs: clear, concise, consistent language
- Simple, consistent formatting/layout
- Alternative formats (A/V, links)

Readability

- Easy to read = easy to follow
- Readable ≈ accessible ≈ findable
- Minimalism → readability

Make docs readable

- Focus on reader
- Clear, simple structure
- 3 Cs: clear, concise, consistent language
- Remove unnecessary words
- Short sentences
- Avoid self-referential language

The Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level Formula measures readability as a U.S. grade level:

0.39 x (words/sentences) +
11.8 x (syllables/words) – 15.59

Source:
webfx.com/tools/read-able/flesch-kincaid/
grammarly.com/blog/readability/
hemingwayapp.com/
Image attribution: unsplash.com/@joshapplegate

Grade 15 (difficult)

When a user connects to the FTP service, FTP shows a greeting banner, which by default includes version information that could be used by attackers to identify weaknesses in a system. To prevent the attackers from accessing this information by changing the default banner, please follow the procedure:

Grade 9 (plain English)

When you run the FTP service, the service shows a greeting banner. By default, the banner includes version information. Attackers could use this information to identify weaknesses in your system. You can hide this information by changing the default banner.

Source:
https://hemingwayapp.com/

Findability

- What is findability?
  - Searchability
  - Scannability

- Why is findability an important aspect of technical documentation?

Foto:

Marten Newhall, Unsplash

Foto:
Zach Plank, Unsplash
Rabie Madaci, Unsplah
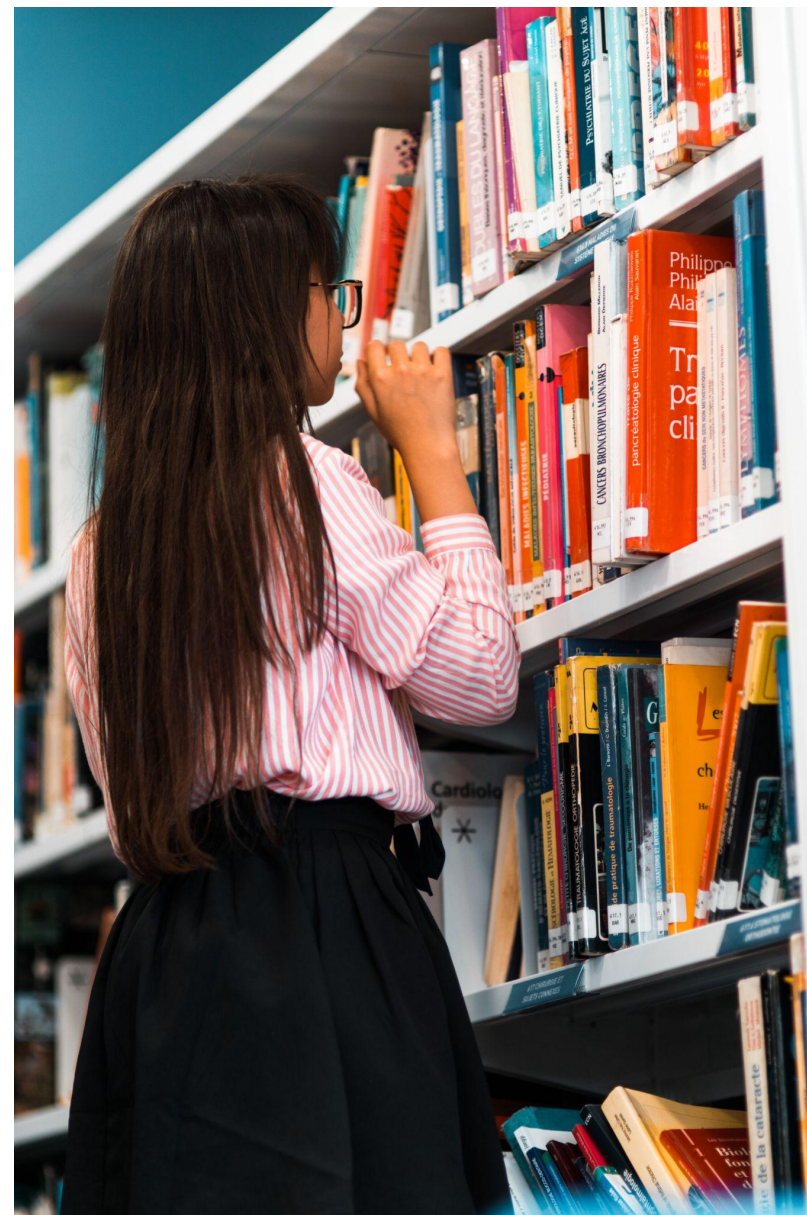
Make content findable

- Organize the content well:
  - Table of contents
  - Clear, descriptive titles + abstracts
  - Consistent formatting
  - Structured text: lists, admonitions

Foto:
Marten Newhall, Unsplash

Reduce words with structure

▶ Bulleted list vs. Numbered list

▶ Parallel structure

Bulleted list:

▶ Apples

▶ Pears

▶ Water melons

▶ Strawberries

Numbered list:

1. Open a book.

2. See page 37.

3. Read the content.

4. Close the book.

The company is looking for a candidate who is:

▶ friendly,

▶ organized,

▶ and is going to arrive to work on time.

▶ punctual

1.2. Installing and enabling the web console

To access the RHEL 9 web console, first enable the `cockpit.socket` service.

Red Hat Enterprise Linux 9 includes the RHEL 9 web console installed by default in many installation variants. If this is not the case on your system, install the `cockpit` package before enabling the `cockpit.socket` service.

Procedure

1. If the web console is not installed by default on your installation variant, manually install the `cockpit` package:

```
# dnf install cockpit
```

2. Enable and start the `cockpit.socket` service, which runs a web server:

```
# systemctl enable --now cockpit.socket
```

3. If the web console was not installed by default on your installation variant and you are using a custom firewall profile, add the `cockpit` service to `firewalld` to open port 9090 in the firewall:

```
# firewall-cmd --add-service=cockpit --permanent
# firewall-cmd --reload
```

Verification steps

- To verify the previous installation and configuration, open the web console.

Make content findable II.

- Cross-references
- Test the docs
- Design docs for target audience

Nice to have:
- Search function
- Feedback

Foto:
Marten Newhall, Unsplash

Procedures

▶ Title

▶ Prerequisites

▶ Steps

▶ Order

▶ Result

1.8. Configuring time settings using the web console

You can set a time zone and synchronize the system time with a Network Time Protocol (NTP) server.

Prerequisites

- The web console is installed and accessible.

  Procedure

  1. Log in to the RHEL web console.

  2. Click the current system time in **Overview**.

  3. Click **System time**.

  4. In the **Change System Time** dialog box, change the time zone if necessary.

  5. In the **Set Time** drop down menu, select one of the following:

  Manually

  Use this option if you need to set the time manually, without an NTP server.

  Automatically using NTP server

  This is a default option, which synchronizes time automatically with the preset NTP servers.

  Automatically using specific NTP servers

  Use this option only if you need to synchronize the system with a specific NTP server. Specify the DNS name or the IP address of the server.

  6. Click **Change**.

- Check the system time displayed in the **System** tab.

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It starts with titles and headings

- Better findability and scannability
- Users expectations
- Good headings:
  - Goal-oriented
  - Short and clear
  - Audience focused (as a WHO, I want WHAT, so that WHY)
  - Accurate and correctly represents the content

Foto:
Marten Newhall, Unsplash

Findability on Google - searchability

Google algorithm key factors:

- Relevance and quality (intent vs. keywords)
- EAT factors: Expertise, Authority, Trust
- Structure and organization (headings and subheadings)
- Alt text for images
- UX (loading speed and mobile-friendliness)

ACCESSIBILITY

READABILITY

FINDABILITY
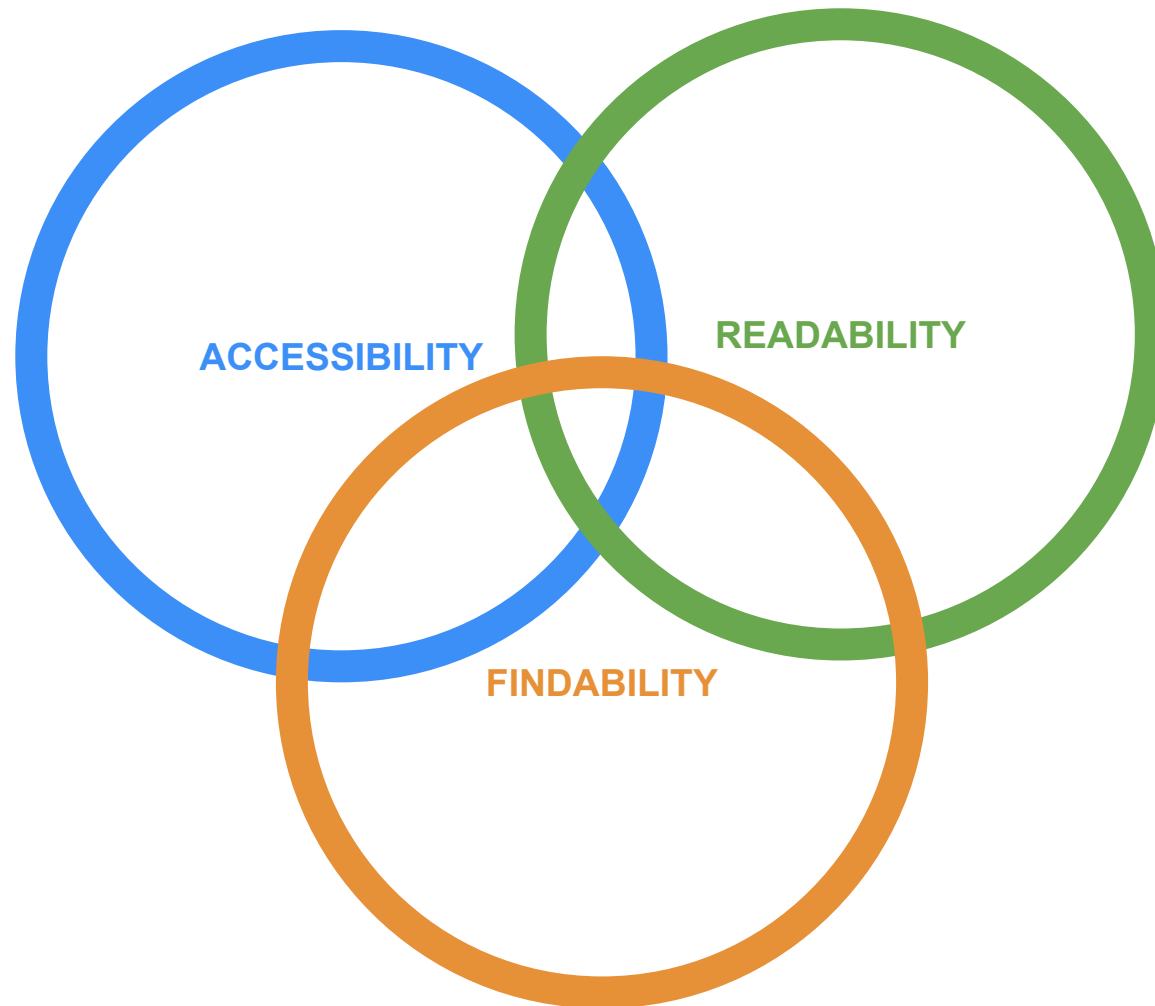
Simple language

▶ Restricted grammar

▶ Restricted vocabulary

▶ Reusing the same words to reduce ambiguity

▶ No fluff

▶ 3 Cs: clear, concise, consistent language

Tenses

- Simple present (SVO)

  - *Cockpit loads a certificate.*   ~~*Cockpit will load a certificate.*~~

- Imperative

  - *Open the web interface.*

  - *Click **System**.*

  - *Select **Restart**.*

- Infinitive

  - *To verify the previous configuration, open the web interface.*

- Active voice vs. passive voice

  - *Install the `schmackage` package.   vs.   The `schmackage` package is installed.*

  - ~~*The path of the rule is fixed.*~~ *vs. Bash remediation fixes the path of the rule.*
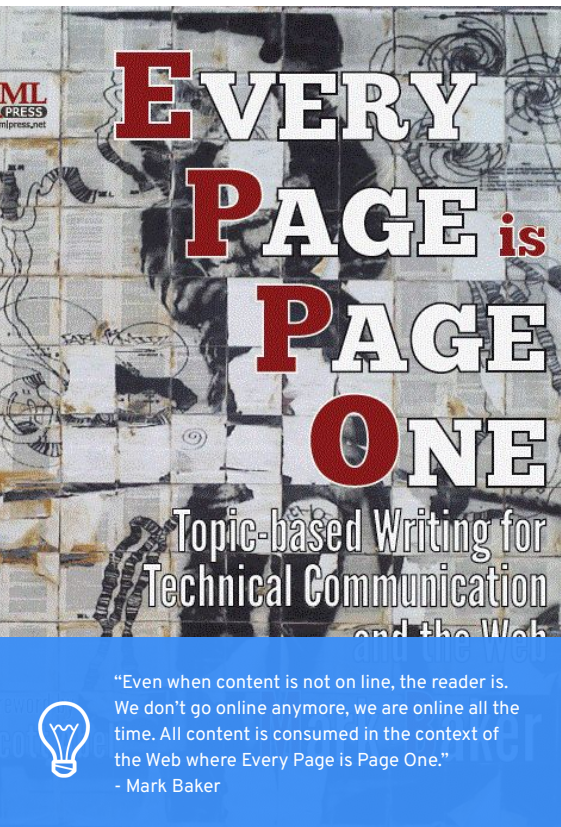
Topic-based authoring

- *Every Page is Page One* by Mark Baker
  - Readers always online
  - All content accessed through the Web
  - Books are hierarchical
  - Web-like content is anti-hierarchical
  - Each topic must stand on its own

"Even when content is not on line, the reader is. We don't go online anymore, we are online all the time. All content is consumed in the context of the Web where Every Page is Page One."
- Mark Baker

Source:
https://everypageispageone.com/the-book/
https://www.oxygenxml.com/dita/1.3/specs/archSpec/base/topicover.html

How a career in technical communication ruined me as a letter writer

BEFORE:

Unnecessary verbage

Redundant

Superfluous detail

Unnecessary--omit.

Sentence too long

Avoid parentheticals

Dear Aunt Bee,

I wanted to thank you so much for the beautiful new angora sweater you sent me for my birthday! I can't believe you remembered that blue is my absolute favorite color (especially that gorgeous shade of robin's egg blue, which reminds me of the summers I spent with you in the country, all those years ago)! I'll think of you whenever I wear it. I really appreciate the time and effort you took to pick this out, wrap it so nicely, and send it to me.

With lots of love, your niece,

Suzanne

Subjective

Avoid future tense; avoid contractions

Unnecessary. She knows who you are.

Last sentence does not add anything to the meaning.

AFTER:

Dear Aunt Bee,

Thank you for the sweater. It is:

- Warm
- Soft
- Blue

I think of you when I wear the sweater. I appreciate your kindness.

Sincerely,

Suzanne

Minimalism

"I didn't have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one." - Mark Twain

Fewest necessary words/elements to convey info.

- User focus: action orientation
- Findability
- Titles, headings
- No fluff
- Error recovery, verification, troubleshooting

Style guides

- Word choice, grammar, punctuation, formatting, tone (sometimes)

- Showcase of rules it promotes. Emulate your favorite.

WHEN IN DOUBT, LOOK IT UP

Technical style guides

- IBM Style

- Microsoft Style Guide

- Google Style Guide

- Apple Style Guide

Non-technical style guides

- The Chicago Manual of Style

- The Associated Press Stylebook

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Source:
Image attribution: The University of Chicago Press, 2017
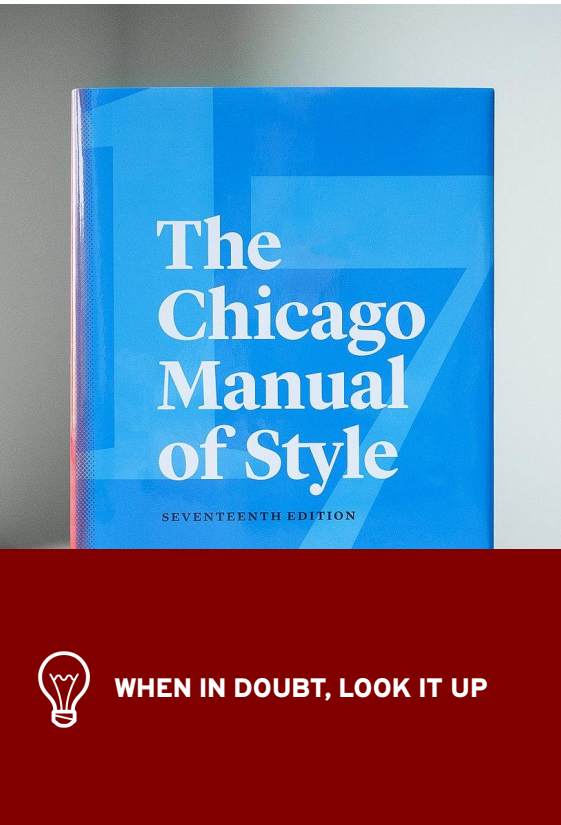
Style guide trends

Friendly, straightforward tone

- Simple grammar/minimalism
- Accessibility
- Bias-free language

Research words.

Investigating the history and usage of a word can help you decide whether to use it.

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Conclusion

- Technical docs style ≠ general writing style

- Focus on readability, findability, accessibility, and the user experience

- Best practices:

  - Use simple, translation-friendly language

  - Say as much as possible in as few words possible

  - Use visual structure and formatting to make the text easy to read

  - Focus on helping the reader accomplish a specific goal

  - Stick to a single style (guide)

Source:
unsplash.com/@kellysikkema

Thank you