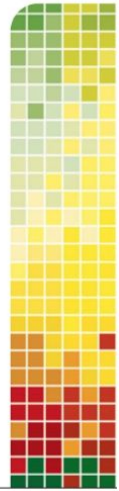




Chapter | 17 | Style in Technical Writing



>>> Chapter Objectives

In this chapter, students will

- Be introduced to the basic elements of style
- Learn to revise sentences for clear, concise style
- Learn the importance of accurate word choice
- Learn to use active and passive voice appropriately
- Be introduced to ways to avoid biased language
- Be introduced to standards for Plain English and Simplified English
- Practice revising sentences for clear, readable, accurate style

This chapter, as well as the Handbook (Appendix A), focuses on the final stage of the writing process—revising. As you may already have discovered, revision sometimes gets short shrift during the rush to finish documents on time. That’s a big mistake. Your writing must be clear, concise, and correct if you expect the reader to pay attention to your message. Toward that end, this chapter offers a few basic guidelines on style. The Handbook contains alphabetized entries on grammar, mechanics, and usage.

After defining style and its importance, this chapter gives suggestions for achieving five main stylistic goals:

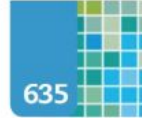
- Writing clear sentences
- Being concise
- Being accurate in wording
- Using the active voice
- Using unbiased language

>>> Overview of Style

Style is usually thought of as a series of personal decisions you make when you write. As noted in Chapter 3, however, much writing is being done these days by teams of writers. Collaborative writing requires individual writers to combine their efforts to produce a consensus style, usually a compromise of stylistic preferences of the individuals involved. The style decisions for individual documents may be recorded in a *style sheet* (Figure 17–1), a table where writers can record decisions that they have made about style. Many writers find it useful to create a style sheet for their own writing, especially for longer documents. Developing a style sheet can help establish a consistent voice across similar documents. Similarly, many organizations tend to

■ **Figure 17–1** ■
Sample rows from
a style sheet

EDITORIAL STYLE SHEET		
<p>Numbers and Dates</p> <p>Spell out numbers from one to nine:</p> <p>12 categories 56 businesses 10-year-old 50 years</p>	<p>Abbreviations/Punctuation</p> <p>Serial comma used:</p> <p>Jobs, promotions, raises, and professional prestige Depth, logic, clarity, unity, supporting evidence, and grammar business, industry, or other settings</p>	
<p>D</p> <p>decision-making process decision makers</p>	<p>E</p> <p>easy-to-read sections e-mail e-book e-reader</p>	<p>F</p> <p>face-to-face meeting flowchart/flowcharts Flip Book</p>



develop an in-house style in documents like reports and proposals, a style that establishes a consistent voice and image in all documents produced in the organization. Thus personal style becomes absorbed into a jointly produced product.

This section (1) provides an overview of *style* as it applies to technical writing and (2) defines one particularly important aspect of style—called *tone*—that relates to every guideline in this chapter.

Style: The features of writing that show its individuality, shaping it to fit the needs of particular audiences and situations. Style results from the conscious and subconscious decisions each writer makes in matters like word choice, word order, sentence length, and active and passive voice. These decisions are different from the “right and wrong” matters of grammar and mechanics (see the Handbook in Appendix A). Instead, they are composed of choices writers make in deciding how to transmit ideas. Technical writing style emphasizes clarity, conciseness, and correctness.

Definition of Style

Just as all writers have distinct personalities, they also display distinct features in their writing. A definition of writing style is shown above.

The more that you revise with an eye to elements of style such as tone, the more subconscious your decisions about style will become.

Importance of Tone

Tone is a major component of style and thus deserves special mention here. Through tone, you express an attitude in your writing—for example, neutral objectivity, on the one hand, or unbridled enthusiasm, on the other. The attitude evident in your tone exerts great influence on the reader. Indeed, it can determine whether your document achieves its objectives. Much like the broader term *style*, *tone* refers to the way you say something rather than what you say.

The following adjectives show a few examples of the types of tone or attitude that can be reflected in your writing. Here they are correlated with specific examples of documents:

1. **Casual tone:** E-mail to three colleagues working with you on a project.
2. **Objective tone:** Formal report to a client in which you present data comparing cost information for replacing the company’s computer infrastructure.
3. **Persuasive tone:** Formal proposal to a client in hopes of winning a contract for goods or services.
4. **Enthusiastic tone:** Recommendation letter to a university to accept one of your employees in a master’s program.
5. **Serious tone:** Memorandum to employees about the need to reduce the workforce and close an office.
6. **Authoritative tone:** Memo to an employee in which you reprimand him or her for violations of a policy about documenting absences.
7. **Friendly tone:** Letter to long-term clients inviting them to an open house at your new plant location.

Although there are almost as many variations in tone as there are occasions to write documents, one guideline always applies: Be as positive as you can possibly be, considering the context. Negative writing has little place in technical communication. In particular, a

condescending or sarcastic tone should be avoided at all costs. It is the kind of writing you will regret. When you stress the positive, you stand the best chance of accomplishing your purpose and gaining the reaction you want from the reader.

Despite the need to make style conform to team or company guidelines, each individual remains the final arbiter of her or his own style in technical writing. Most of us will be our own stylists, even in firms in which in-house editors help improve written documents. This chapter helps writers deal with everyday decisions of sentence arrangement, word choice, and the like. However, although style is a personal statement, you should not presume that anything goes. Certain fundamentals are part of all good technical style in the professional world. Let's take a look at these basics.

>>> Writing Clear Sentences

Each writer has his or her own approach to sentence style, yet everyone has the same tools with which to work: words, phrases, and clauses. This section defines some basic terminology in sentence structure, and then it provides simple stylistic guidelines for writing clear sentences.

Sentence Terms

The most important sentence parts are the subject and verb. The *subject* names the person doing the action or the thing being discussed (e.g., *He completed the study/The figure shows that*); the *verb* conveys action or state of being (e.g., *She visited the site/He was the manager*).

Whether they are subjects, verbs, or other parts of sentences, words are grouped into two main units: clauses and phrases. A *clause* has both a subject and a verb. Either it stands by itself as a *main clause* (e.g., *He talked to the team*), or it relies on another part of the sentence for its meaning and is thus a *dependent clause* (e.g., *After she left the site, she went home*). A *phrase* lacks a subject or verb or both, and thus it must always relate to or modify another part of the sentence (e.g., *She relaxed after finishing her presentation/As project manager, he had to write the report*).

Beyond these basic terms for sentence parts, you also should know the four main types of sentences (main clauses are in boldface; dependent clauses are in italics):

- A *simple sentence* contains one main clause: **He completed his work.**
- A *compound sentence* contains two or more main clauses connected by conjunctions: **He completed his work, but she stayed at the office to begin another job.**



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- A *complex sentence* includes one main clause and at least one dependent clause: *After he finished the project, he headed for home.*
- A *compound-complex sentence* contains at least two main clauses and at least one dependent clause: *After they studied the maps, they left the fault line, but they were unable to travel much farther that night.*

Guidelines for Sentence Style

Knowing the basic terms of sentence structure makes it easier to apply stylistic guidelines. Following are a few fundamental guidelines that form the underpinnings for good technical writing. As you review and edit your own writing or that of others, put these principles into practice.

>> Sentence Guideline 1: Place the Main Point Near the Beginning

One way to satisfy this criterion for good style is to avoid excessive use of the passive voice (see “Using the Active Voice” on pages 644–645); another way is to avoid lengthy phrases or clauses at the beginnings of sentences. Remember that the reader usually wants the most important information first. The following revision moves the actors (the corporate staff) to the subject position and focuses attention on their actions.

Original: “After reviewing the growth of the Cleveland office, it was decided by the corporate staff that an additional lab should be constructed at the Cleveland location.”

Revision: “The corporate staff decided to build a new lab in Cleveland after reviewing the growth of the office there.”

>> Sentence Guideline 2: Focus on One Main Clause in Each Sentence

When you string together too many clauses with *and* or *but*, you dilute the meaning of your text. However, an occasional compound or compound-complex sentence is acceptable, just for variety. The following revision puts the key information (the change in the interview date) in the main clause, with additional information in a dependent clause.

Original: “The M-Global hiring committee planned to interview Jim Steinway today, but bad weather delayed his plane departure, and the committee had to reschedule the interview for tomorrow.”

Revision: “The M-Global hiring committee had to change Jim Steinway’s interview from today to tomorrow because bad weather delayed his flight.”

>> Sentence Guideline 3: Vary Sentence Length, but Seek an Average Length of 15–20 Words

Of course, do not inhibit your writing process by counting words while you write. Instead, analyze one of your previous reports to see how you fare. If your sentences are too long, make an effort to shorten them, such as by making two sentences out of one compound sentence connected by *and* or *but*.

You should also vary the length of sentences. Such variety keeps your reader's attention engaged. Make an effort to place important points in short but emphatic sentences. Reserve longer sentences for supporting main points. In the passage below, information about the armadillo and raccoon populations is placed in shorter sentences, emphasizing the problems caused by these two species.

Original: "Our field trip for the project required that we conduct research on Cumberland Island, a national wilderness area off the Georgia Coast, where we observed a number of species that we had not seen on previous field trips. Armadillos were common in the campgrounds, along with raccoons that were so aggressive that they would come out toward the campfire for a handout while we were still eating. We saw the wild horses, which are fairly common on the island and were introduced there by explorers centuries ago, as well as a few bobcats, which were introduced fairly recently in hopes of checking the expanding population of armadillos."

Revision: "Our field trip required that we complete research on Cumberland Island, a wilderness area off the Georgia Coast, where we observed many species we had not seen on previous field trips. Both armadillos and raccoons were common in the campgrounds. Although the armadillos were docile, the raccoons were quite aggressive. The raccoons approached the campfire for a handout while we were still eating. We also encountered Cumberland's famous wild horses, introduced centuries ago by explorers, as well as a pair of bobcats. Bobcats were brought to the island recently to check the expanding armadillo population."

Sentence Guidelines

- Place the main point near the beginning
- Focus on one main clause in each sentence
- Vary sentence length, but seek an average length of 15–20 words

>>> Being Concise

Some experts believe that careful attention to conciseness could shorten technical documents by 10 percent to 15 percent. As a result, reports and proposals would take less time to read and cost less to produce. This section on conciseness offers several techniques for reducing verbiage without changing meaning.

>> Conciseness Guideline 1: Put Actions in Verbs

Concise writing depends more on verbs than it does on nouns. You can shorten sentences that contain abstract nouns that hide actions by putting the action in strong verbs instead. By converting abstract nouns to action verbs, you can eliminate wordiness, as the following sentences illustrate:

Wordy: "The *acquisition* of the property was accomplished through long and hard negotiations."

Concise: "The property was *acquired* through long and hard negotiations."

Wordy: "*Confirmation* of the contract occurred yesterday."

Concise: “The contract was *confirmed* yesterday.”

Wordy: “*Exploration* of the region had to be effected before the end of the year.”

Concise: “The region had to be *explored* before the end of the year.”

Wordy: “*Replacement* of the transmission was achieved only three hours before the race.”

Concise: “The transmission was *replaced* only three hours before the race.”

As the examples show, abstract nouns often end with *-tion* or *-ment* and are often followed by the preposition *of*. These words are not always “bad” words; they cause problems only when they replace the action verbs from which they are derived. The following examples show some noun phrases along with the preferred verb substitutes:

assessment of	assess
classification of	classify
computation of	compute
delegation of	delegate
development of	develop
disbursement of	disburse
documentation of	document
elimination of	eliminate
establishment of	establish
negotiation of	negotiate
observation of	observe
requirement of	require
verification of	verify

>> **Conciseness Guideline 2: Shorten Wordy Phrases**

Many wordy phrases have become common in business and technical writing. Weighty expressions add unnecessary words and rob prose of clarity. Following are some of the culprits, along with their concise substitutes:

afford an opportunity to	permit
along the lines of	like
an additional	another
at a later date	later
at this point in time	now
by means of	by
come to an end	end
due to the fact that	because
during the course of	during

for the purpose of	for
give consideration to	consider
in advance of	before
in the amount of	of
in the event that	if
in the final analysis	finally
in the proximity of	near
prior to	before
subsequent to	after
with regard to	about

>> Conciseness Guideline 3: Replace Long Words with Short Ones

In grade school, most students are taught to experiment with long words. Although this effort helps build vocabularies, it can also lead to a lifelong tendency to use long words when short ones will do. Of course, sometimes you want to use longer words just for variety—for example, using an occasional *approximately* for the preferred *about*. As a rule, however, the following long words (in the left column) should routinely be replaced by the short words (in the right column):

advantageous	helpful
alleviate	lessen, lighten
approximately	about
cognizant	aware
commence	start, begin
demonstrate	show
discontinue	end, stop
endeavor	try
finalize	end, complete
implement	carry out
initiate	start, begin
inquire	ask
modify	change
prioritize	rank, rate
procure	buy
terminate	end, fire
transport	move
undertake	try, attempt
utilize	use

>> Conciseness Guideline 4: Leave Out Clichés

Clichés are worn-out expressions that add words to your writing. Although they once were fresh phrases, they became clichés when they no longer conveyed their original meaning. You can make writing more concise by replacing clichés with a good adjective or two. Following are some clichés to avoid:

- as plain as day
- ballpark figure
- efficient and effective
- few and far between
- last but not least
- leaps and bounds
- needless to say
- reinvent the wheel
- skyrocketing costs
- step in the right direction

>> Conciseness Guideline 5: Make Writing More Direct by Reading It Aloud

Much wordiness results from talking around a topic. Sometimes called *circumlocution*, this stylistic flaw arises from a tendency to write indirectly. You can avoid it by reading passages aloud. Hearing the sound of the words makes problems of wordiness quite apparent. It helps condense all kinds of inflated language, including the wordy expressions mentioned earlier. Remember, however, that direct writing must also retain a tactful and diplomatic tone when it conveys negative or sensitive information.

Indirect: “We would like to suggest that you consider directing your attention toward completing the project before the commencement of the seasonal monsoon rains in the region of the project area.”

Direct: “We suggest you complete the project before the monsoons begin.”

Indirect: “At the close of the last phase of the project, a bill for your services should be expedited to our central office for payment.”

Direct: “After the project ends, please send your bill immediately to our central office.”

Indirect: “It is possible that the well-water samples collected during our investigation of the well on the site of the subdivision could possibly contain some chemicals in concentrations higher than is allowable according to the state laws now in effect.”

Direct: “Our samples from the subdivision’s well might contain chemical concentrations beyond those permitted by the state.”

>> Conciseness Guideline 6: Avoid *There Are*, *It Is*, and Similar Constructions

There are and *it is* should not be substituted for concrete subjects and action verbs, which are preferable in good writing. Such constructions delay the delivery of information about who or what is doing something, and they tend to make your writing lifeless and abstract. Avoid them by creating (1) main subjects that are concrete nouns and (2) main verbs that are action words. Note that the following revised passages give readers a clear idea of who is doing what in the subject and verb positions.

Original: “There are many M-Global projects that could be considered for design awards.”

Revision: “Many M-Global projects could be considered for design awards.”

Original: “It is clear to the hiring committee that writing skills are an important criterion for every technical position.”

Revision: “The hiring committee believes that writing skills are an important criterion for every technical position.”

Original: “There were 15 people who attended the meeting at the client’s office in Charlotte.”

Revision: “Fifteen people attended the meeting at the client’s office in Charlotte.”

>> Conciseness Guideline 7: Cut Out Extra Words

This guideline covers all wordiness errors not mentioned earlier. You must keep a vigilant eye out for any extra words or redundant phrasing. Sometimes the problem comes in the form of needless connecting words, like *to be* or *that*. Other times it appears as redundant points—that is, points that have been made earlier in a sentence, paragraph, or section and do not need repeating.

Delete extra words when their use (1) does not add a necessary transition between ideas or (2) does not provide new information to the reader. (One important exception is the intentional repetition of main points for emphasis, as in repeating important conclusions in different parts of a report.) A variety of ways exist to shorten and focus sentences.

Original: “Preparing the client’s final bill involves the checking of all invoices for the project.”

Revision: “Preparing the client’s final bill involves checking all project invoices.”

Original: “During the course of its fieldwork, the M-Global team will be engaged in the process of reviewing all of the notes that have been accumulated in previous studies.”

Revision: “During its fieldwork, the M-Global team will review all notes accumulated in previous studies.”

Original: “The department must determine its aims and goals so that they can be included in the annual strategic plan produced by M-Global for the year of 2013.”

Revision: “The department must determine its goals so that they can be included in M-Global’s 2013 annual strategic plan.”

Original: “Most M-Global managers generally agree that all of the company’s employees at all of the offices deserve at least some degree of training each year that they work for the firm.”

Revision: “Most M-Global managers agree that all company employees deserve some training each year.”

Conciseness Guidelines

- Put actions in verbs
- Replace long words with short ones
- Leave out clichés
- Make writing more direct by reading it aloud
- Avoid *there are*, *it is*, and similar constructions
- Cut out extra words

>>> Being Accurate in Wording

Good **technical** writing also demands accuracy in phrasing. Technical professionals place their reputations and financial futures on the line with every document that goes out the door. That fact shows the importance of taking your time on editing that deals with the accuracy of phrasing. Accuracy often demands more words, not fewer. The main rule is:

Never sacrifice clarity for conciseness.

Careful writing helps to limit liabilities that your organization may incur. Your goal is very simple: Make sure words convey the meaning you intend—no more, no less. Some basic guidelines to follow include:

>> Accuracy Guideline 1: Distinguish Facts From Opinions

In practice, this guideline means you must identify opinions and judgments as such by using phrases like *we recommend*, *we believe*, *we suggest*, or *in our opinion*.

Example: “In our opinion, spread footings would be an acceptable foundation for the building you plan at the site.”

If you want to avoid repetitious use of such phrases, group your opinions into listings or report sections. Thus a single lead-in can show the reader that opinions, not facts, are forthcoming.

Example: “On the basis of our site visit and our experience at similar sites, we believe that (1) _____, (2) _____, and (3) _____.”

>> Accuracy Guideline 2: Include Obvious Qualifying Statements When Needed

This guideline does not mean you must be overly defensive in every part of the report; it means that you must be wary of possible misinterpretations.



Example: “Our summary of soil conditions is based only on information obtained during a brief visit to the site. We did not drill any soil borings.”

>> Accuracy Guideline 3: Use Absolute Words Carefully

Avoid words that convey an absolute meaning or that convey a stronger meaning than you intend. One notable example is *minimize*, which means to reduce to the lowest possible level or amount. If a report claims that a piece of equipment will *minimize* breakdowns on the assembly line, the passage could be interpreted as an absolute commitment. The reader could consider any breakdown at all to be a violation of the report’s implications. If instead the writer had used the verb *limit* or *reduce*, the wording would have been more accurate and less open to misunderstanding.

Accuracy Guidelines

- Distinguish facts from opinions
- Include obvious qualifying statements when needed
- Use absolute words carefully

>>> Using the Active Voice

Striving to use the active voice can greatly improve your technical writing style. This section defines the active and passive voices and gives examples of each. It also lists some practical guidelines for using both voices.

What Do Active and Passive Mean?

Active-voice sentences emphasize the person (or thing) performing the action—that is, somebody (or something) does something (“Matt completed the field study yesterday”). Passive-voice sentences emphasize the recipient of the action itself—that is, something is being done to something by somebody (“The field study was completed [by Matt] yesterday”). Following are some other examples of the same thoughts being expressed in first the active and then the passive voice:

Active: “We *reviewed* aerial photographs in our initial assessment of possible fault activity at the site.”

Passive: “Aerial photographs *were reviewed* [by us] in our initial assessment of possible fault activity at the site.”

Active: “The study *revealed* that three underground storage tanks had leaked unleaded gasoline into the soil.”

Passive: “The fact that three underground storage tanks had been leaking unleaded gasoline into the soil *was revealed* in the study.”

Active: “We *recommend* that you use a minimum concrete thickness of 6 in. for residential subdivision streets.”

Passive: “*It is recommended* that you use a minimum concrete thickness of 6 in. for residential subdivision streets.”

Reading through these examples gives the sense that passive constructions are wordier than active ones. Also, the passive voice tends to leave out or minimize the person or thing doing the action. Although occasionally this impersonal approach is appropriate, the reader can become frustrated by writing that fails to say who or what is doing something.

When Should Active and Passive Voices Be Used?

Both the active voice and the passive voice have a place in your writing. Knowing when to use each is the key. Following are a few guidelines that will help:

■ *Use the active voice when you want to:*

1. Emphasize who is responsible for an action (“*We recommend that you consider...*”)
2. Stress the name of a company, whether yours or the reader’s (“*PineBluff Contracting expressed interest in receiving bids to perform work at...*”)
3. Rewrite a top-heavy sentence so that the person or thing doing the action is up front (“*Figure 1 shows the approximate locations of...*”)
4. Pare down the verbiage in your writing; the active voice is usually a shorter construction

■ *Use the passive voice when you want to:*

1. Emphasize the receiver of the action or the action itself rather than the person performing the action, especially if the actor is unknown or is unimportant to the reader (“*Samples will be sent directly from the site to our laboratory in Sacramento*”)
2. Avoid the kind of egocentric tone that results from repetitious use of *I*, *we*, and the name of your company (“*The project will be directed by two programmers from our Boston office*”)
3. Break the monotony of writing that relies too heavily on active-voice sentences

Although the passive voice has its place, it is far too common in business and technical writing. This stylistic error results from the common misperception that passive writing is more objective. In fact, excessive use of the passive voice only makes writing more tedious to read. In modern business and technical writing, strive to use the active voice.

>>> Using Unbiased Language

Bias in language is based on stereotypes about gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability, or age. Often writers may not even be aware that their language suggests bias that may be offensive to some readers. Race, ethnicity, and religion are not usually relevant to workplace documents, unless sensitivity to a specific cultural context needs to be explained to readers. For example, a guide for employees going to another country might need to include information about how religious practices in that country affect social and business interactions. This information should be treated like any other information about the culture.

Because language usually follows changes in culture rather than anticipating such changes, writers should review their documents to make sure that they reflect current usage. It may be useful to ask someone else to read through your documents to look for biased language that you might have missed. These three rules can help you avoid biased language:

- “Put the person first.” For example, instead of referring to a “visually impaired user,” write about “a user who is visually impaired.”
- Be as specific as possible, for example, referring to “customers over age 70” instead of “the elderly.”
- Pay attention to differences in words that label groups. Notice which have positive or negative implications, and learn which are preferred by specific groups themselves. For example, the words *Mexican*, *Hispanic*, and *Latino* are not interchangeable, nor do they always refer to immigrants to the United States.

Techniques for Avoiding Sexist Language

Many writers have problems with subject–verb agreement when they are trying to avoid sexist language. (The *engineer* recorded *their* data.) The strategies that follow help you avoid this problem. Not all these strategies will suit your taste in writing style; use the ones that work for you.

>> Technique 1: Avoid Personal Pronouns Altogether

One easy way to avoid sexist language is to delete or replace unnecessary pronouns:

Example:

Sexist language: “During *his* first day on the job, any new employee in the toxic waste laboratory must report to the company doctor for *his* employment physical.”

Nonsexist language: “During *the* first day on the job, each new employee in the toxic-waste laboratory must report to the company doctor for *a* physical.”

>> Technique 2: Use Plural Instead of Singular Pronouns

In most contexts you can shift from singular to plural pronouns without altering meaning. The plural usage avoids the problem of using masculine pronouns.

Example:

Sexist language: “*Each* geologist should submit *his* time sheet by noon on the Thursday before checks are issued.”

Nonsexist language: “*All* geologists should submit *their* time sheets on the Thursday before checks are issued.”

Interestingly, you may encounter sexist language that uses generic female pronouns inappropriately. For example, “Each nurse should make every effort to complete *her* rounds each hour.” As in the preceding case, a shift to plural pronouns is appropriate: “Nurses should make every effort to complete *their* rounds each hour.”

>> Technique 3: Alternate Masculine and Feminine Pronouns

Writers who prefer singular pronouns can avoid sexist use by alternating *he* and *him* with *she* and *her*. When using this technique, writers should avoid the unsettling practice of switching pronoun use within too brief a passage, such as a paragraph or page. Instead, writers may switch every few pages, or every section or chapter.

Although this technique is not yet in common use, its appeal is growing. It gives writers the linguistic flexibility to continue to use singular pronouns generically. However, one problem is that the alternating use of masculine and feminine pronouns tends to draw attention to itself. Also, the writer must work to balance the use of masculine and feminine pronouns, in a sense to give equal treatment.

>> Technique 4: Use Forms Like *He or She*, *Hers or His*, and *Him or Her*

This solution requires the writer to include pronouns for both genders.

Example:

Sexist language: “The president made it clear that each M-Global branch manager will be responsible for the balance sheet of *his* respective office.”

Nonsexist language: “The president made it clear that each M-Global branch manager will be responsible for the balance sheet of *his or her* respective office.”

This stylistic correction of sexist language may bother some readers. They believe that the doublet structure of *her or his* is wordy and awkward. Many readers are bothered even more by the slash formations of *he/she*, *his/her*, and *her/him*. Avoid using these.

>> Technique 5: Shift to Second-Person Pronouns

Consider shifting to the use of *you* and *your*, words without any sexual bias. This technique is effective only with documents in which it is appropriate to use the instruction-related command tone associated with the use of *you*.

Example:

Sexist language: “After selecting *her* insurance option in the benefit plan, each new nurse should submit *her* paperwork to the Human Resources Department.”

Nonsexist language: “Submit *your* paperwork to the Human Resources Department after selecting *your* insurance option in the benefit plan.”

>> Technique 6: Be Especially Careful of Titles and Letter Salutations

Today, most women in business and industry are comfortable being addressed as *Ms*. If you know that the recipient prefers *Miss* or *Mrs.*, use that form in your salutation. If a person's gender isn't obvious from the name, call the person's employer and ask how the person prefers to be addressed. (When calling, also check on the correct spelling of the person's name and the person's current job title.) Receptionists and secretaries expect to receive such inquiries.

When you do not know who will read your letter, never use *Dear Sir* or *Gentlemen* as a generic greeting. Such a mistake may offend women reading the letter and may even



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cost you some business. *Dear Sir or Madam* is also inappropriate. It shows you do not know your audience, and it includes the archaic forms *sir* and *madam*. Instead, call the organization for the name of a particular person to whom you can direct your letter. If you must write to a group of people, replace the generic greeting with an *Attention* line that includes the name of the group.

Examples:

Sexist language: Dear Miss Finnegan: [to a single woman for whom you can determine no title preference]

Nonsexist language: Dear Ms. Finnegan:

Sexist Language: Dear Sir: or Gentlemen:

Nonsexist Language: Attention: Admissions Committee

No doubt the coming years will bring additional suggestions for solving the problem of sexist language. Whatever the culture finally settles on, it is clear that good technical writing style no longer tolerates the use of such language.

>>> Plain English and Simplified English

When you are writing technical or business documents, you may be asked to use one of two important styles of workplace writing: Plain English or Simplified English. Both of these styles include specific recommendations about sentence structure and word choice, and each is designed for particular audiences and purposes.

Plain English

Plain English is a specific style recommended for U.S. government documents and for documents such as proposals and reports that are submitted to federal agencies. Although people had been discussing clearer government documents for years, the Plain Language movement gained strong support during the mid-1990s. In 1995, a group of people began creating standards for Plain English in government writing. This group became the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN).

Plain English guidelines include many of the elements of clear technical communication: audience awareness, good document design, effective use of headings, and clear organization. However, Plain English is most clearly defined by its style recommendations, which include the following:

- Use the active voice.
- Put actions in strong verbs.
- Use *you* to speak directly to the reader.
- Use short sentences (no longer than about 20 words).
- Use concrete words.

- Use simple and compound sentences with a subject–verb structure.
- Make sure that modifiers are clear.
- Use parallel structure for parallel ideas.
- Avoid wordiness.

The Plain Language Web site at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov> includes a complete discussion of Plain English with examples and links to other resources.

Simplified English

Simplified English includes many of the same recommendations as Plain English, and it is sometimes confused with Plain English. However, it serves a different purpose and is designed for a different audience. Simplified English, sometimes called *Controlled English* or *Global English*, is designed for the global economy. It is designed for an audience for whom English is a second language, to be easily translatable from English into other languages. A leading organization for the development of Simplified English is the European Association of Aerospace Manufacturers (AECMA), which created the original standard in the 1980s.

Simplified English is designed to be clear and unambiguous, so it recommends specific sentence structures and limited vocabulary. Simplified English includes the following rules:

- Use only approved words.
- Use one word for each meaning (avoid synonyms).
- Use only one meaning for each word (e.g., *close* is used only as a verb).
- Use the active voice.
- Use strong verbs.
- Use articles (*a, an, the*) or demonstrative adjectives (*this, that, these, those*) for clarity.
- Avoid strings of more than three nouns.
- Use short sentences (fewer than 20 words).

More information about Simplified English standards is available at <http://www.asd-ste100.org>, and an overview of Simplified English is available at <http://www.userlab.com/SE.html>, which also includes guidelines and a sample list of approved words at <http://www.userlab.com/Downloads/SE.pdf>. Because the standards were developed for the aerospace industry, some word lists are specialized for that industry. An excellent general guide is John R. Kohl's *The Global English Style Guide*.

>>> Chapter Summary

- Style includes the features of writing that writers choose, rather than the features that are required by rules of grammar and mechanics.
- Technical writing style emphasizes clarity, conciseness, and correctness to create usable documents.

- Clauses include a subject and a verb; phrases lack a subject or a verb or both.
- The four main sentence types are simple sentences (one main clause), compound sentences (two or more main clauses), complex sentences (one main clause and one or more dependent clauses), and compound-complex sentences (more than one main clause and one or more dependent clauses).
- Sentences should be focused on one main clause, usually placed at the beginning of the sentence, and should be varied in length.
- Concise writing puts the action in verbs, avoids unnecessary phrases, chooses shorter words over longer ones, and avoids clichés and constructions with extra words and phrases.
- Accurate writing clearly distinguishes facts from opinions, includes qualifying statements when necessary, and uses absolute words carefully.
- Active-voice sentences emphasize the person or thing performing the action. They are preferred when writers want to emphasize who is responsible for the action, want to stress the name of the company, and want to make sentences more concise.
- Passive-voice sentences emphasize the recipient of the action. They are preferred when writers want to emphasize the recipient of the action, avoid repetition of first-person pronouns, or want to add sentence variety to a document.
- Writers should avoid biased language. Avoiding nonsexist language poses a special problem for writers. Techniques for writing nonsexist language include avoiding singular pronouns, using plural pronouns, alternating masculine and feminine pronouns, using combined terms like *her or she*, and using second-person pronouns. Writers should be especially careful of unintended sexism when addressing correspondence.
- Plain English is a specific style recommended for U.S. government documents and proposals. It emphasizes clear writing with characteristics such as active-voice sentences, strong verbs, and concrete words.
- Simplified English, also known as Controlled English and Global English, is designed for international audiences. It includes some of the characteristics of Plain English, such as active voice and strong verbs, but it also emphasizes controlled vocabulary and short, simple sentences.

>>> Learning Portfolio

Communication Challenge An Editorial Adjustment

M-Global, Inc., hired a technical writer/editor at its Cleveland office, the smallest branch in the company. The office finally generates enough reports and proposals to justify the addition, and Evelyn Tobin started the job a month ago. Some of the Cleveland employees who were comfortable with the old system are now having trouble adjusting to having an editor. This case study reviews some background on the hiring of Evelyn and the changes she is making in office writing. It ends with questions and comments for discussion and an assignment for a written response to the Challenge.

Winds of Change

For years, the staff at M-Global's Cleveland office handled all of its own writing and editing. Managers, engineers, scientists, accountants, trainers, and others had to draft and edit their own copy. Because they could depend on no one else to help, they gave great attention to the process and prided themselves on the quality of their writing. With the aid of several good secretaries, who often corrected grammar while they typed, the documents produced seemed adequate.

The growth of the office, however, increased the number and complexity of the reports and proposals that went out the door. The quality of editing began to decline. Those who observed the trend tied it to the following changes:

- Each writer simply had a higher volume of reports and proposals to complete, to keep the office competitive with similar firms.
- A new mobility in the workforce meant that fewer employees received on-the-job training from old-timers at the office. In fact, more than half the positions requiring a college degree had been filled in the past three years.
- This new workforce came from many different academic backgrounds and from other firms, so it was harder than it had been to impose a set "style" at the office.
- The experienced secretaries, who had been expert editors, retired. Many of them were simply not replaced, because word-processing programs reduced the need for secretarial staff.

The branch manager observed these changes. Perhaps the last straw came when one long-time client returned a report with corrections made in red ink, along with this note: "You guys used to turn out good reports. What's happened?" With that embarrassment, the branch manager quickly hired an in-house technical writer/editor.

New Editor Takes Charge

When Evelyn Tobin started work a month ago, she met with all the staff to discuss her duties. At that meeting, there was general agreement that Evelyn would (1) provide writing advice, (2) perform a style edit for some reports, (3) be the lead writer for key proposals, (4) help with training in the office, and (5) do a quick grammar edit on as many reports as she had time to review.

With a B.S. in technical communication and two years of editing experience with a government agency that emphasized Plain English, Evelyn was used to simplifying writing that was confusing, convoluted, or too technical. Although she had not worked with technical firms like M-Global, she assumed all her experience would translate to the new job. As it happened, most of her initial work involved style edits of reports that were to be sent to a mixed readership—some readers had a technical background, but others did not. Following are several changes Evelyn made in the reports, along with the original passages:

1. **Original:** The purpose of the new well is to allow Tank, Inc., to perform monthly water-level monitoring at three locations at the oil field so that the results can be sent to the Water Quality Control Board.
Evelyn's revision: The new well will allow Tank, Inc., to monitor water levels at the oil field. Then the data will be sent to the Water Quality Control Board.
2. **Original:** During the drilling of the boring, some soil sampling was performed by our technicians for the purpose of determining the exact location of the water table at the site.
Evelyn's revision: While drilling the boring, the technicians sampled soils to locate the water table.
3. **Original:** This letter proposal has been prepared by us for use by whatever attorney you select so that he can present a ballpark figure of costs to the college governing board.
Evelyn's revision: We prepared this proposal for whatever attorney you select. Then she can present a cost estimate to the college governing board.
4. **Original:** At this point in time, it is our belief that you should give equal consideration to both alternatives, for both can afford you the opportunity to complete expansion of the office complex prior to summer.



Evelyn's revision: At this point, we believe you should consider both alternatives. Either one will allow you to expand the office by next summer.

5. **Original:** There are a total of two ways we are recommending that you consider changing the plans in order to minimize the chance for earthquake damage.

Evelyn's revision: We recommend two changes to reduce the chance for earthquake damage.

Questions and Comments for Discussion

- Study the original and revised versions carefully.
 - Explain the rationale you think Evelyn would have for each of the changes she made.
 - Given the audience for the documents, was she right to make the changes?
 - Can you see changes in content that the original writer might find unacceptable?
 - Are there any cases where you need more context surrounding the passage to provide adequate answers to the two previous questions? Explain.
- Would your answers to any of the previous questions change if the only audiences for the reports had been teams of technical experts?
- Are there any alternative revisions that you think would be as effective as, or more effective than, the revisions Evelyn made?
- Suggest what you think would be the best way for Evelyn to convey her revisions to the writers. Would this method change or stay the same as she gains more experience at the office?
- One employee came to Evelyn for advice on some grammar-checking software. He noted that his software stopped at every passive-voice sentence and suggested an active-voice replacement, and he wondered if he should always make the change. If you were in Evelyn's position, what answer would you give?
- Discuss the effect that hiring a technical writer/editor might have on an office like M-Global-Cleveland—that is, how might the change affect the corporate culture of a such a company, where the professional staff spends from 25 to 50 percent of its time writing and editing documents?
- If you were working at the Cleveland office, how would you feel about having your documents reviewed for style? For grammar?

Write About It

Although M-Global does not often bid on federal projects, it does sometimes write proposals for state or county projects. Assume the role of Evelyn and write a memo that argues for the importance of Plain English and that presents a brief description of Plain English style. Use the resources at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov> for information about Plain English.

Collaboration at Work Describing Style

General Instructions

Each Collaboration at Work exercise applies strategies for working in teams to chapter topics. The exercise assumes you (1) have been divided into teams of about three to six students, (2) will use time inside or outside of class to complete the case, and (3) will produce an oral or written response. For guidelines about writing in teams, refer to Chapter 3.

Background for Assignment

As this chapter points out, the term *style* refers to the way you choose to express an idea, as opposed to the content of the idea itself. The definition of *style* early in this chapter makes it clear that writers adopt particular styles for different contexts. The same is true of organizations. What an organization chooses to include in its style guide, as well as the choices it makes about style, can vary widely among industries or even individual organizations within the same industry.

Team Assignment

As a team, search the Internet for a number of style guides that have been developed for specific companies, nonprofit organizations, or government agencies. (Use the search phrase “style guide” or “style manual.”) Each member of your team should choose one style guide and answer the following questions:

- What organization produced the style guide?
- What key topics are included in the style guide?
- How is the style guide organized?
- Does the style guide include any general discussion of what it includes or how decisions on style were made? If so, what is discussed?
- Do the contents and organization of the style guide suggest anything about what the sponsoring organization values most? If so, what?

As a team, compare your answers. Also choose a number of style issues and see if any of the style guides specifically address those issues (for example, *email* or *e-mail*, *Web site* or *website*, preference for *active voice* or *passive voice*, use

of numbers). Do the style guides agree? If not, what do you think might have made the difference? Be prepared to share your team's findings with the class.

Assignments

1. Conciseness: Abstract Words

Make the following sentences more concise by replacing abstract nouns with verbs. Other minor changes in wording may be necessary.

- Verification of the agreement was indicated by the signing of the contract by members of the M-Global corporate staff.
- The inspectors indicated that observation of the site occurred on July 16, 2005.
- Negotiation of the final contract was to happen on the day after their arrival.
- After three hours of discussion, the branch managers agreed that establishment of a new M-Global mission statement should take place in the next fiscal year.
- Assessment of the firm's progress will happen during the annual meeting of the M-Global Board of Directors.
- The entire company agreed that classification of employees according to level of education was inappropriate.
- Documentation of the results of the lab test appeared in the final report.
- Unlike the previous year, this year the disbursement of stock dividends will occur after the annual meeting.
- In analyzing the managerial style of the manager, the outside evaluators determined that delegation of authority appeared to be a problem for her.
- The financial statement showed that computation of the annual revenues had been done properly.

2. Conciseness: Wordy Phrases and Long Words

Condense the following sentences by replacing long phrases and words with shorter substitutes.

- In the final analysis, we decided to place the new pumping station in proximity to the old one.
- Prior to commencing the project, they met to prioritize their objectives.

- Endeavoring to complete the study on time, Sheila transported the supplies immediately from the field location to the M-Global lab.
- During the course of his career, he planned to utilize the experience he had gained in the ambulance business.
- His work with the firm terminated due to the fact that he took a job with another, competing firm.
- In the event that two clients need a crew in Austin next week, we can give consideration to using the same crew for both projects and lowering travel costs for both clients.
- Jim McDuff was not cognizant of the fact that younger employees felt differently than older employees about the expansion of their office building.
- To implement the Phoenix asbestos project, we made adjustments in the workload of two engineers so that they could be available to undertake the project in Phoenix.
- Subsequent to the announcement he made, he held a news conference for approximately one hour of time.
- At this point in time, she had every hope that her annual bonus would afford her family the opportunity to take an additional family vacation.

3. Conciseness: Clichés and There Are/It Is Constructions

Rewrite the following sentences by eliminating clichés and the wordy constructions *there are* and *it is*.

- They all agreed that the issue had been discussed repeatedly for the past 10 years; thus they did not want to reinvent the wheel during the current study.
- There are many examples of skyrocketing equipment costs affecting the final budget for a project.
- It is a fact that most employees at M-Global believe the company has taken a step in the right direction by adding international offices.
- Needless to say, it is clear that Karen is looking forward to the three-week vacation.