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Writing quality and style are a very important aspect of technical communication. For that reason, the brief excerpt below suggests how to make writing more organized, natural, compact, and active.

**Compact writing**

Suspect wordiness in everything you write. Quarrel with the need for every paragraph, every sentence, every word. The longer you take to say things, the more you blur your ideas. When deadlines permit, let your writing rest for a day and then rewrite it. To help you hunt for wordiness, here are some common sources that are easy to spot and fix.

**Doublings**

Avoid writing about a project's importance and significance when importance will do. Pairs of words with similar meanings add needless bulk to writing. Whatever the differences between theory and concepts, for example, they are not worth calling attention to if you just want to give a general idea.

"**It is**"

No two words hurt writing more than the innocent-looking it is. They stretch sentences, delay your point, encourage passive verbs, and hide responsibility. Unless it refers to something mentioned earlier, write around it is. "It is necessary that you revise ruthlessly" becomes "You need to revise ruthlessly." And the roundabout "It is realized" becomes the straightforward "We realize" or "I realize." Spare only natural expressions like "It is time to...."

Less common, but no less wordy, are the cousins of it is: there are and there is. "There are two alternatives mentioned in the report" becomes "The report mentions two alternatives." Similarly, "There is a helicopter pad on the ship" becomes "A helicopter pad is on the ship." You can avoid most of these beginnings with just a little rewriting.

**Smothered Verbs**

Weak writing relies on general verbs that take extra words to complete their meaning. When you write a general verb like is, give, hold, and have, see if a nearby word will make a more specific verb. Here are some common smothered (and unsmothered) verbs: "The committee members held a meeting [met] to give consideration to [consider] the
plan. They made the decision [decided] to give their approval to [approve] it." Make use of (Use) specific verbs. Avoid diluting the action words in your sentences.

"That and Which"

Look for thats and whiches to cut from your writing. Often those words do not help meaning or flow. Sometimes you can just drop either word: "We believe that the changes will help." Sometimes you will have to rewrite slightly: "a system which is reliable" becomes "a reliable system."

"The________ion of"

Shorten words ending in -ion whenever the context permits. Instead of saying "I recommend the adoption of the plan," say "I recommend adopting the plan." And instead of saying "We want the participation of the command," say "We want the command to participate." Words ending in -ion are verbs turned into nouns. Writing is shorter when it favors verb (action) forms over noun (static) forms.

Wordy Expressions

Wordy expressions do not give writing impressive bulk; they litter it by getting in the way of the words that carry the meaning. Verbs and nouns do the real work; long linking phrases do not deserve the attention they receive. So, simplify forms of four common wordy expressions: in order to (to), for the purpose of (to), in the near future (soon), in the event that (if). These wordy expressions and others appear in the section, "Simpler Words and Writing."

Hut 2-3-4 Phrases

Although you should cut needless words, sometimes you can go too far. Avoid building hut 2-3-4 phrases, long clusters of nouns and modifiers. Readers cannot tell easily just what modifies what or when such clusters will end. You may have to use official hut 2-3-4 phrases like air traffic control radar beacon system, but you can avoid creating unofficial ones like computer programs advance information. Instead, write advance information on computer programs. And for rapid operational equipment distribution use rapid distribution of operational equipment. By increasing the number of words, you increase reading speed.

Specialized Terms

Like hut 2-3-4 phrases, the overuse of specialized terms is false economy. Avoid your job's shorthand with outsiders, and use it no more than you must with insiders. Spell out uncommon abbreviations and acronyms the first time they appear. If they will appear only twice, a good rule is to spell them out both times. The goal is to keep readers from pausing to decide your shorthand.
Natural Writing

To avoid a bloated bureaucratic style, make your writing more like speaking. Because readers hear writing, the most readable writing sounds like people talking to people.

Begin by imagining your reader is in front of you. If you are writing to many different people and none in particular, picture one typical reader. Then write with the techniques that follow--the best of speaking.

Once you have written a draft, read it aloud. Take the time to revise. For most of us, good writing really means good rewriting. The effort is worth it and will help the many who must read your writing.

Respect Plain Words

Go out of your way to use small words. Issue directives, do not promulgate them. Start things, do not initiate them. Readers may know utilize means use and optimum means best but why force them to translate? You sell yourself in your writing. Come across as a sensible person, someone who knows that good English is plain English.

Prefer Short Transitions

Prefer short, spoken transitions over long, bookish ones. Use but more than however, also more than in addition, still more than nevertheless, so more than consequently or therefore.

The shorter transitions help set the right tone, a natural one, for the rest of what you say. Save the longer transitions for variety.

Ask More Questions

Reach out to your readers now and then by asking questions. A request gains emphasis when it ends with a question. In a long report, a question can be a welcome change.

Keep Sentences Short

For a variety, mix long sentences and short ones, but average 20 words or less. Although short sentences will not guarantee clarity, they are usually less confusing than long ones.

To-The-Point Writing

Much writing follows a pattern of organization that is easy on writers but hard on readers. Most of us write the way we think, by leading up to our conclusions. From a reader's perspective, it is the clue-by-clue pattern of mystery stories. A more helpful pattern is that of newspaper articles, which open with the most important information and taper off to the least important.
**Open with Your Main Point**

What is the one sentence you would keep if you could keep only one? That sentence is your main point. Whenever you can, start with that sentence.

Give commands before reasons, requests before justifications, answers before explanations, conclusions before details. Readers need to know your main point early so they can appreciate the relevance of whatever else you say. If no single sentence stands out, you may need to create one to keep from wandering aimlessly. Occasionally, as in a set of instructions or a reply to various questions, all your points may be equally important. In this case, start with a sentence that tells your readers what to expect: "These are the training quotas for FY 82."

**Use Short Paragraphs**

Important ideas are swamped in long paragraphs. Cover one topic completely before starting another, and let a topic take several paragraphs if necessary. But keep paragraphs short, down to roughly four or five sentences. Long paragraphs will divide where your thinking takes a turn. By adding white space, you make reading easier.

Call attention to lists of items or instructions by displaying them in subparagraphs. And when topics vary widely, use headings to catch your reader's eye.

**Write Strong Sentences**

Write emphatic sentences. For example,

not

Reference (a) proposed double-coding 21 Navy billets. The rationale was that these billets then would have more candidates. This proposal is supported.

but

We support double-coding 21 Navy billets, which reference (a) proposed.

or

We support the proposal in reference (a) to double-code 21 Navy billets.

or

We support the referenced proposal to double code 21 Navy billets.

The first (not) example wrongly gives the reference a major role as the subject of an independent clause. The remaining examples give the reference its proper minor role first
in a dependent clause, then in a phrase, and finally in a single adjective. As emphasis on the reference decreases, emphasis on important ideas increases.

Emphasis also increases on words that begin and end sentences. The next sentence stresses soon:

The course will be given to middle and senior managers soon.

Soon would receive less emphasis if placed in the middle of the sentence. If soon were the opening word, its emphasis would be compounded by its placement and the reversal of normal word order. Begin and end sentences with any words you like, but keep in mind that you can make important ideas stand out by positioning them strategically.

**Keep Lists Parallel**

In lists, stick to one pattern. By avoiding interruptions, you set up expectations that make reading easy. Violations of parallelism occur most often when writers mix the following:

- Things and actions
- Statements and questions
- Active instructions and passive ones

The headings in this section form a list of active instructions. The list would lose its parallelism if instead of Keep lists parallel we used things (Paralled lists) or passives (Lists must be kept parallel). The trick is to be consistent. Make ideas of equal importance look equal.

After you have mastered this kind of parallelism, go on to subtle forms that involve balancing words with words, phrases with phrases, and clauses with clauses. You will find them discussed in any grammar text.

**Active Writing**

Write actively most of the time. Over 75 percent of the verbs in magazines and newspapers are active. Many writers, however, make 75 percent of their verbs passive. As a result, much writing is wordy, roundabout, and sometimes confusing.

**Put Doers Before Verbs**

To spot passive verbs, look for any form of to be plus the past participle of a main verb (a verb usually ending in -en or -ed). Here are some forms of to be: is, are, was, were, am, be, being, been. Passive verbs, then, look like these: was inspected, has been left, is being anchored, may be chosen.
Sentences written with passive verbs are wordy and roundabout. They reverse the natural, active order of English sentences. In the passive example that follows, notice how the receiver of the verb's action comes before the verb, and the doer comes after the verb.

Active: The skipper inspected the ship.
Passive: The ship was inspected by the skipper.

Besides lengthening and twisting sentences, passive verbs often muddy them. Whereas active sentences must have doers, passive ones are complete without them:

Nominations are approved beforehand. By whom?
Plans are being made. By whom?
You will be notified. By whom?

To avoid most passive verbs, find the doer of the verb's actions and put it before the verb. By leading with the doer, you automatically will follow with an active verb:

Supervisors must approve nomination beforehand.
We are making plans.
I will notify you.

You can sometimes avoid a passive verb without rearranging the sentence. Simply change the verb or drop part of it:

Passive: Your request has been received.
Active: Your request has arrived.
Active: Annapolis is in Maryland.
Passive: Annapolis is located in Maryland.

Write passively now and then--when you have a good reason not to say who or what does the action; readers understand the passive voice faster than the active voice when passives are appropriately used.

**Write Direct Instructions**

Instructions deserve special attention because we write so many of them, often with so many passives. When describing how to do something, talk directly to your readers by leading with verbs. Imagine someone has just walked up to you and asked what to do.

Passive: All safes will be checked.
Active: Check all safes.
Passive: Each dial must be spun.
Active: Spin each dial.

To improve instructions further, apply these next techniques:
State rules before exceptions.
Stress important points.
Choose exact words.
Say who does what.
Give examples of difficult ideas.
Divide processes into small steps.
Use headings, subparagraphs, parallel lists.
Answer likely questions.
Test your material.
Rewrite to avoid ambiguity.

**Avoidance of Sexually Biased Language**

Use the following guidelines to avoid language that is sexually oriented:

Avoid the use of sex references in job titles. Use crew member not crewman, employee not workman.
Avoid the use of male and female gender word forms such as aviator and aviatrix. Include both sexes by using terms that refer to people as a whole. Use humanity not mankind.
Avoid the use of masculine and feminine pronouns and adjectives in referring to a hypothetical person or persons.

For example, "The average American worker spends 20 years of his life in the work force," can be changed to "The average American spends 20 years in the work force," or "Most Americans spend 20 years of their lives in the work force," or "An average American spends 20 years of his or her life in the work force." In the first example, the sentence has been reworded to eliminate unnecessary gender pronouns and adjectives; in the second, the sentence is recast in the plural form; in the third, masculine or feminine pronouns or adjectives have been replaced.