

# Chapter 3: style in technical writing (summary)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

CHAPTER 3: STYLE IN TECHNICAL WRITING (Summary) Technical style is the way you write when dealing with technical subject matter. Technical writing style is distinguished by a calm, restrained tone, by an absence of any attempt to arouse emotion, by the use of specialized terminology, and by an accepted convention of the use of abbreviations, numbers, and symbols.

**Part I Reader Adaptation** Knowing the reader and the purpose of a report permits what is generally called "reader adaptation", that is, writing the report to suit the needs, knowledge, and interests of the reader.

**The Scientific Attitude** Long established convention dictates that formal reports be written in the third person, generally in the passive voice. Exclusion of personal pronouns produces a style consistent in tone with objectivity, and that the use of the passive voice permits placing emphasis on the subject matter of the report rather than upon who worked with the subject matter. It is also necessary to exclude words and phrases of an emotional sort unwarranted by the subject matter.

**Making Sentences Say What You Mean** The technical writer must be certain that he is expressing his thought accurately. A great deal of bad writing results from the writer's failure to think carefully enough about what his sentences actually say. To avoid mistakes of this kind, put aside a piece of writing for as long as you can after finishing the first draft. Leave it until you can see the words instead of the pictures in your head.

**Precision in the Use of Words**

- \*Knowing what words mean Many words are used incorrectly in technical writing. Reference to a good dictionary will help.
- \*Avoiding vague words Precision of meaning is not lost through outright error in the use of terms but by the use of words which do not convey the exact meaning demanded.
- \*Leaving out unnecessary words Words which serve no useful purpose should be rigorously weeded out of your reports during the process

of revision. \*Using simple, familiar, concrete words One of the essential qualities of a good report is that it clear, concise and convenient and adds that " the use of technical words should be limited as far as possible to those which those prospective readers are familiar". \*Avoiding overworked words and phrases Trite words and phrases are not necessarily wrong, their frequent use makes them tiresome to discriminating readers. \*Avoiding Technical Jargon Avoid shoptalk or technical slang. Such work may be clear to workers in your scientific or technical field but they will not serve your purpose if they are not known to your readers. Sentence Structure and Length Good technical writing calls for a natural word order, simple sentence structure, and fairly short sentences. The normal, natural order of elements in English sentences is (1) subject, (2) verb and (3) object or complement. Each of this element may be modified or qualified by adjectives or adverbs. Make most of your sentences simple in structure and natural in order, but to vary the pattern enough to avoid unpleasant monotony and to provide proper emphasis. You should also be careful about sentence length. Paragraph Structure and Length Typically, a paragraph begins with a sentence (the topic sentence) which states the gist of the idea to be developed. The other sentences of the paragraph develop, support and clarify this center idea. The requirements of technical style urge you to follow the tried practice of placing the topic sentence first in the paragraph, or, at the very latest, just after whatever transitional sentences appear. Two considerations govern paragraph length: unity of the thought and the eye relief for the reader. To sum up, remember that all sentences in a paragraph must be about the same topic; but also remember that paragraph should not be too long. Part II Common Errors in Usage \*Special subject-verb

relationship Two constructions give inexperienced writers a great deal of trouble: (1) sentences in which the subject is essentially plural but technically (or grammatically) singular and (2) sentences with relative clauses. Remember that the verb following a relative pronoun must agree with the noun to which the pronoun refers. \*Vague use of " This", " Which" and " It" Since a pronoun conveys no information in itself but is meaningful only in reference to the word or phrase for which it stands, the references should be unmistakably clear. " Ambiguity" is the fault when reference is not clear. \*Dangling Modifiers A dangling modifier is one which has nothing to modify logically or grammatically, or one which seems to modify a word it cannot possibly modify. Remember that any phrase expressing action must be related to a specific word that names the actor. \*Lack of Parallel Structure Parallelism means the use of similar grammatical structure in writing clauses, phrases or words expressing ideas or facts which are roughly equal in value. A failure to maintain parallelism results in what is called a " shifted construction". Mechanics of Style Mechanics of style is the use of abbreviations, numbers, symbols, word forms, capitals, italics, and punctuation. Abbreviations should be used only when they are certain to be understood by the reader. Otherwise, the terms should be spelled out. Symbols are generally to be avoided in text. The sole purpose of punctuation is to clarify thought, to make reading easy. Punctuation which does not contribute to this purpose should be avoided.