

Writing Tips for ~~Good~~ Better Technical Documentation

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A presentation by Steve Wells, Technical Writer

June 2019

Why?

Because!

- These tips can help you write better technical documents.
- They help with other writing. These are tips about writing, not tech docs. After this, you will be able to write ~~a lot of much more gooder~~ better text.
- This is simple material, and it can be fun. It's, "Do **this** instead of *that*." Simple as, "Put on your socks first, then your shoes—not the other way around."
- We'll see good rules, and good reasons to break them.

Part 1

This material started as a set of 10 tips in 2005, when the California Department of Health Services developed the SIS system for pre and post-natal testing.

A single technical document (before editing) contained a stunning selection for potential writing improvements, providing *all* the samples for Tips 1–10.

Tips appear with the poorly written samples to the left on a dark background. Better versions are to the right on a light background. We follow the Star Wars metaphor: “... beware of the dark side.” Tip headings also demonstrate the concepts.

Write Spelling

Verify the correct spelling *and* the correct words. Misspelling hurts, but so do wrong words.

Use a spell checker

Inn summaty whetjer theirs nose knoq.

Inn summary whether theirs nose know.

Hay, eat pasta spelt Czech.

Don't trust the spell checker

What does that gibberish sound like?

In summery weather there's no snow.

Hey, it passed a spell check.

You need the right words!

Usually.

0

Item 0. Zero-indexed count because this is separate from the other ten tips. Sometimes, a wrong word turns right. In 1975, a research chemist was told to test a potential insecticide made from chlorinated sugar. He mis-heard “test” as “taste.” Thus, we have Sucralose—at 600× the sweetness of sugar, America’s best selling artificial sweetener.

Present Arms

Use present tense unless you *must* use another tense to express the idea, such as an event clearly in the future.

Will not use

This warning will be

The dates you will enter

You will be able to

Use

This warning is

The dates you enter

You can

Okay to use: If you poke scissors into a power outlet, you will regret it.

1

Unlike most languages, in regular speech, we do not use present tense for present actions. We use it for habitual actions.

For example: “What are you doing? I eat lunch,” sounds weird. And, “And now what? I write JavaScript.”

You say, “I am eating lunch. I’m writing JavaScript “ But, “What do you do at lunchtime. I eat lunch,” sounds fine. “What do you do after lunch? I write JavaScript.”

Be Active

Use active voice unless you can't avoid passive voice.

Active voice is simple, powerful, and direct. Passive voice is wordy, wimpy, and circumlocutory. But omit the sentence subject to avoid laying blame for errors.

Isn't used by you

Alerts for your referred cases can be viewed by clicking the "Monitor" module.

Corrections can be made

is displayed

Use

Click the **Monitor** module to view alerts for your referred cases.

You can make corrections

appears

Okay: Invalid year entered. Re-enter as YYYY.

Invalid—not valid. **Invalid**—not healthy. They have the same root.

Brevity

The fewer words you use, the less you have to write.

This is wordy with extra unnecessary words

The **Save** button must then be clicked to ensure entered data is not lost after it has been added to the grid.

provide the action you need to take in order to resolve the inconsistency

You will be able to

complete the tasks necessary to complete this task

Brief

Click the **Save** button to ensure entered grid data is not lost.

take action to resolve the inconsistency

You can

complete the necessary tasks

That last one came straight from the Department of Redundancy Department.

Preposition Proposition

Don't add superfluous prepositions.

Not with

Clicking **on** the column header

We have taken this case off **of** your inventory.

from among your referred patients.

Helpful information **for how** to complete a task more quickly

Use

Click the column header

We have taken this case off your inventory.

among your referred patients.

Helpful information to complete a task more quickly

Go Going

Use a present tense verb to indicate action.

Gerunds are longer and can produce confusing translations in other languages.

Not using

Clicking on the column header

By clicking this button

Clicking one of the data selections results in

Use

Click the column header

Click this button

Click one of the data selections to

Ambiguous: “Flying airplanes can be dangerous.”

Don't Quote Me

Use quotes for attribution or to qualify an unusual usage.
Do not use quotes to replace formatting or to indicate labels.

“Not”

the “Monitor” module

to “Save” the data

Use

the **Monitor** module

Click **Save** to save the data

Okay: The core element is based on an FTL nanoprocessor with 25 bilateral “kelilactirals,” with 20 of those being slaved into the primary Heisenfram terminal.

Now you do know what a bilateral kelilactiral is? From Star Trek: The Next Generation, (1992) Episode “Rascals” (Story by Ward Botsford, Diana Dru Botsford, Michael Piller. Teleplay by Allison Hock. Directed by Adam Nimoy.)

Complete Expressions

Follow modifiers with their antecedents.

Missing the final

in the dropdown

Use complete terms

in the dropdown list

[or]

in the dropdown box

You Can't Please Them All

An occasional “please” imposes inconsistency. Omit it except for system imposed failures. Write instructions in *imperative* mood. Terse instructions are *not* impolite.

“So, pretty *please*, with sugar on top,
clean the ... car” Pulp Fiction

“Just do it”
Nike

No thanks, if you please

Please put in appointment information

Please invoke the status of “Scheduled”.

Use

Enter appointment information

Select **Scheduled** status.

Okay: System unavailable. Please try again later.

Imperative mood (mode) means telling someone to do something: a command or request. As opposed to Indicative mood, just indicating something.

Subjunctive is mainly for wishes, hopes, possibilities: “If I *were* Emperor of the Universe...” Different from indicative, if I *was* hungry, I’d go eat.

Okey-Dokey

Avoid jargon or colloquial terms. Use verbs that clearly specify the action.

Nope, no way, José!

the environment that will exist at go-live

put in appointment information

will not happen in this environment

If you want to replace one check with another

This message will tell you that you need to correct this information.

Exercises 1, 2 and 3 give detailed instructions

Use

a fully operating environment

enter appointment information

do not occur in this environment

to replace one selection with another

This message indicates that you must correct this information.

Exercises 1, 2, and 3 provide detailed instructions

Check to see that jargonwise, it's A-OK.

Who's in Charge?

*And strange to tell, among that Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried—
“Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?”*

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam
Quatrain LX

Used

These fields must be corrected before SIS will allow you to submit information to the database

allows editing information

The print dialog box allows users to choose the output device

Use

You cannot submit information to the database until you correct these fields.

You can edit information

Within the print dialog box, users choose the output device

Anthropomorphism: treating computers or inanimate objects as though they had intentions or feelings. “Allow” refers to permissions and protected access.

Part 2

The author includes additional writing suggestions in the form of self-refuting examples created by George L. Trigg, editor of Physical Review Letters, Volume 42, Number 12, page 748, 19 March 1979.

Matchmaker, Matchmaker Make Me a Match

The subject (which does the action) and predicate (the action/verb) must match in several ways.

Hold a Rematch

Verbs has to agree in number with their subjects.

Use parallel construction not only to be concise but also clarify.

As far as incomplete constructions, they are wrong.

Just between you and I, the case of pronouns is important.

Make sure each pronoun agrees with their antecedent.

Use

Verbs **have** to agree in number with their subjects.

Use parallel construction not only to be concise but also **to** clarify.

As far as incomplete constructions **go**, they are wrong.

Just between you and **me**, the case of pronouns is important.

Make sure each pronoun agrees with **its** antecedent.

But, okay to use **they, them, and their** as singulars instead of **he/she/it, him/her/it, his/her/its**.

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Formal grammarians: Robert Loath (Bishop of Oxford) wrote “Short Introduction to English Grammar with critical notes” 1762. His students included Lindley Murray and William Cobbett. In spite of formalism, languages are constantly in transition, and with heightened gender sensitivity, we often use the plural pronouns, “they, them, and their” as generic singular forms for everything but *very* formal writing. For a legal filing, we might say, “At night, the driver should turn on his, her, or its headlights.” But we’re doing documents for regular people. “At night, the driver should turn on their headlights.”

In a Comma Coma

We recommend the Serial comma / Oxford comma / Harvard comma. Include a comma before the conjunction: One, two, and three. It usually avoids ambiguity.

Comma Again?

In letters essays and reports use commas to separate items in series.

Don't use commas, which are not necessary.

Parenthetical words however should be enclosed in commas.

This set of tips is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand and Thomas Jefferson.

Keep a supply handy

In letters, essays, and reports use commas to separate items in series.

Don't use commas which are not necessary.

Parenthetical words, however, should be enclosed in commas.

This set of tips is dedicated to my parents, Ayn Rand, and Thomas Jefferson.

Were my parents Ayn Rand and President Jefferson?

Missing in Action

Don't forget punctuation or even words.

Where are they?

Check to see if you any words out.

Don't use run-on sentences you got to punctuate them.

Its important to use apostrophes right in everybodys writing.

Here they are!

Check to see if you **left** any words out.

Don't use run-on sentences. You've got to punctuate them.

It's important to use apostrophes right in everybody's writing.

It's and its. If it can be separated as two words, "it is" use an apostrophe, otherwise not.

Short Supply

Some favorite quick bits.

Too short

Don't use no double negatives.

Don't abbrev.

About sentence fragments.

Use

Don't use **any** double negatives.

Don't **abbreviate**.

If you have no verb, you have sentence fragments.

Hear Here

Watch out for homonyms. They have different spellings and *meanings*.

But they sound the same

Spell the word rihgt.

Remember thier *i* before *e* rules.

Tw owords may be spaced incorrectly.

Watch yuor transposed letters.

Sew / Sow / So What?!

A word wright follows a rite to write the right word.

They're using their correct homonyms there.

Too often, two words sound similar to each other.

In days of yore, they'd say you're choosing your words well.

Rigorously, these are homophones. They sound the same, or nearly so.

Don't Leave Them Dangling

Dangling modifiers add confusion. Rearrange the sentence to modify the correct term.

What's in the Desk?

There is a complete record of all fires set by arsonists in the Fire Marshall's desk.

Ask the boy riding the bicycle with red hair.

Where there's smoke,
there's desks.

Is the record of information in the desk?

Were the fires set in the desk?

Were the arsonists in the desk?

Were arsonists in the desk setting fires there?

Ask the ~~boy-riding the bicycle~~ boy-riding the bicycle.

Rearranging doesn't quite do it. "Ask the boy with red hair riding the bicycle." That suggests his red hair is riding the bicycle.

Done and Overdone

Metaphorically speaking, leave the metaphors home in technical writing.

Maybe for advertising

It behooves us all to avoid archaic expressions.

Mixed metaphors are a pain in the neck and ought to be weeded out.

Last but not least, lay off clichés.

Too hokey for tech

“Behooves” is archaic.

You don’t weed out pains in the neck.

We’re done!

Thank you!