

Technical Writing Style

Technical style means putting words in the correct position within a sentence so that they reach their maximum effectiveness.

When we read, we expect to find the subject at the beginning of the sentence. We expect the verb to come right after the subject. You'll find writing much easier if you think of sentences as following this formula:

Subject + verb = sentence

"Subject + verb = sentence" is the writing equivalent of "2 + 2 = 4." It works **every** time, without fail. In this formula, the subject is in the "subject position" and the verb is in the "verb position."

Making People the Subjects of Sentences

Sentences are easier to understand when we write about *someone* doing *something*. Make people the subjects of sentences. We then call that subject an "actor." Put the "actor" in the "subject position."

You can make people the subjects of sentences in four ways, including:

- Use a person's name
- Use a pronoun
- Use a collective noun
- Use imperative voice

Pronouns	I, me, mine, you, yours, yourself, he, him, his, himself, her, hers, herself, she, ours, theirs, they, their, them, themselves
Collective nouns	Collective nouns refer to a group of people like doctors, students, athletes, teachers, and so on.
Imperative voice	Imperative voice indicates a command, like <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sit• Stop• Stand• Listen <p>The implied subject in each of these sentences is <i>you</i>. Since <i>you</i> is a pronoun, it follows our rule. Technical writers frequently write directions, which always start with imperative statements.</p>

Eliminating Passive Voice

In technical writing, we use active voice. Active voice is shorter. Because of this, sentences written in active voice tend to be more clear.

Passive voice includes any form of the verb “to be”:

Am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been

Passive verbs need help from other words, which makes sentences longer. Passive voice isn’t necessarily bad. It’s just indirect and wordy in a written document.

We can use passive voice:

- If we’re describing something
Lab samples are in green, yellow, and red glass tubes.
- If we don’t care who performed the action
Lab samples are collected at noon.

In sentences written in passive voice, you’ll often find the actor in a prepositional phrase that starts with the word “by.”

The law was passed *by the senators*.

Put the verb next to the actor (the subject of the sentence). Put the action in the verb.

Eliminating Nominalizations

Sometimes writers accidentally hide the action in the sentence by turning the verb into a noun. We call this change a **nominalization**. Nominalizations occur when we change a verb into a noun by adding one of these endings:

- –tion
- –ment
- –ence

Here’s an example of a sentence with a nominalization:

Police are conducting an investigation.

The fire marshal isn’t conducting the way an orchestra leader conducts. The fire marshal isn’t an electrical wire conducting a current. The fire marshal isn’t conducting *at all*. He’s **investigating**. We hope.

Most of the nominalizations you’ll find in TECM 2700 have the –ion ending.

Tying Sentences Together with the “New/Old” Pattern

We tend to focus more on the end of the sentence than on the beginning. If you have new information or a technical term, put that new information or technical term near the end of the sentence. In the next sentence, restate the new information or technical term. Since you’ve already used the “new” information or technical term once, it’s now “old.” This is called tying sentences together with the “new/old” pattern.

If you think your writing tends to be choppy, this technique will help you. You may already do this without even realizing it.

Here’s an example of how tying sentences together with the new/old pattern works:

The Carter Blood Center will begin a recognition program for *plasma donors*. A 2012 *plasma donor* group suggested displaying annual updates of plasma donation totals on *plaques*. On each *plaque*, small dated and numbered brass plates indicate the donation year and the number of units donated.

Using Reader-Focused Language

Reader-focused language is

- Specific and unambiguous
- Concise
- Simple
- Positive when appropriate
- Inoffensive
- Sensitive to reader’s culture and language

Specific & Unambiguous Language

Specific language is clear and concise. The following sentence is vague:

A microscope in the lab isn’t working properly.

Here’s a more clear version:

The capture window on the microscope shows only black and white images.

Ambiguity in sentences results from

- Misplaced modifiers
- Dangling modifiers
- Stacked nouns
- Faulty word choice

<p>Misplaced Modifiers</p>	<p>A modifier is a word, phrase, or string of words that gives us more information about something else in the sentence.</p> <p>Modifiers need to go next to the word or words they modify. A modifier that isn't near the word or words it modifies is called a "misplaced modifier." Here's an example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Give it to the girl at the desk with the long hair.</i> <p>The sentence makes it sound like the desk has long hair. It probably doesn't. ☺</p> <p>Here's the revised sentence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Give it to the long-haired girl sitting at the desk.</i> <p>That makes a lot more sense! The phrase "<i>with the long hair</i>" modifies the word "<i>girl</i>."</p>
<p>Dangling Modifiers</p>	<p>A modifier "dangles" if it doesn't have anything to refer to. Most of the time, this is the result of writing sentences with no actor. See how that subject + verb formula helps?</p> <p>Here's an example of a sentence with a dangling modifier:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Trying to put out the fire, the fire extinguisher broke.</i> <p>We know perfectly well that the fire extinguisher can't come down off the wall all by itself. A human has to operate it. Here's what we really meant:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>As I tried to put out the fire, the fire extinguisher broke.</i> <p>Dangling modifiers often cause another common problem called faulty predication. Faulty predication occurs when the predicate (everything in the sentence, including the verb, <i>except</i> the subject) indicates an action the noun can't possibly perform.</p> <p>Your instructor probably has not talked about faulty predication. But you're lucky—you've come to the UNT Writing Lab!</p> <p>Here's an example of faulty predication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Call the office.</i> <p>You can't call the office because it's brick and mortar. It can't answer the phone. You can, however, call the office <i>staff</i>. They can answer the phone, maybe even on the first or second ring. ☺</p>

<p>Stacked Nouns</p>	<p>Stacked nouns are more than three nouns placed together.</p> <p>It's really hard to fix stacked nouns.</p> <p>About the only thing you can do is to try to make one of the nouns into a verb.</p> <p>Here's an example of a stacked noun:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The manager suggested that the consultant set aside time for a fitness center member evaluation.</i> <p>The stacked noun is "fitness center member evaluation," which contains a nominalization of the word "evaluate." Here's a revision with "evaluation" turned back into a verb:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The manager suggested that the consultant set aside time to evaluate the members of the fitness center.</i>
<p>Faulty Word Choice</p>	<p>Use specific, concrete language. Look at this sentence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>My teacher is mad.</i> <p>That could mean your teacher is angry, or it could mean your teacher is mentally ill. We can't really tell.</p> <p>Now look at this sentence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We were held up at the bank.</i> <p>This could mean that we were delayed at the bank, or it could mean that we were held at gunpoint. We can't really tell.</p> <p>Choose words that convey the specific meaning you intend.</p>

Concise Language

Use only the words readers really need. Many words appear as **redundant pairs**, two words that do the same work. Your course textbook has a list of redundant pairs. One of the biggest offenders in this category is "each and every." These words mean the same thing, and they make sentences unnecessarily wordy.

Simple Language

Choose words all readers will understand. For example, rather than writing *utilize*, substitute *use*. They mean the same thing. Remember that there's a human on the other side of the page. Think about how you'd say the sentence if you and your reader were talking to each other.

Positive Language

Readers understand positive language better than they do negative language. We want to tell readers what **to do**. We want to tell readers **what something is** rather than what it is not.

Positive language doesn't pertain to the words *no*, *not*, or *never*. We need those words to make ourselves understood. Instead, it means words that have negative connotations like *chaos*, *misunderstanding*, *confusion*, *delay*, *unfortunately*, *disaster*, and so on.

As technical writers, we're problem solvers. We want to focus on the solution. Most of the time, our reader is already aware of the problem. For example, do you need a 30-page manual on the parking problem here at UNT? Of course you don't. You'd probably love a short statement about a solution, though.

Inoffensive Language

Choose words that include all readers, both male and female. Some readers will feel excluded if you use gender-specific terms. Here's an example of exclusionary language:

- *Each student should discuss his degree plan with his adviser at least two years before his planned graduation.*

What about all the females? Here's a revision that includes everyone:

- *Discuss your degree plan with your adviser at least two years before you graduate.*

Here's some more language that might offend readers:

- *The school district has a program for autistic children.*

Some readers might find the term "autistic children" offensive. Here's a revision without that term:

- *The school district has a program for special-needs children.*

It doesn't really matter if we understand why the word is offensive to our reader. We have to know the term that group currently finds acceptable, and then we have to use that term.

These words change frequently, so make sure to check them out before you use them, especially if your writing will be published or placed online.

Sensitive to Reader's Culture and Language

Idiomatic language (phrases that we use in everyday speech) can be particularly difficult for non-native English speakers. Here's an example:

- *It's raining cats and dogs.*

Idioms don't translate well. Often, the literal meaning of an idiom doesn't match the way we use it figuratively in our speech.

Works Cited

Sims, Brenda. *Technical Communication in the Information Age*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishers, 2012.

