

# Writing Modern Technical English

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# OUTLINE

- **Overuse of words**
- **Vagueness**
- **Idioms**
- **There are, there were, there is, there are**
- **The tense of verbs**
- **Avoid using “one”**
- **Modifiers**
- **Consistency**
- **Avoid negative statements**

# Overuse of Words

- *The academic world faces **particular** problems. (serious, unique)*
- *This is what Chen found of **particular** interest. (unusual, special)*
- ***Particularly** in my later writings, I failed. (painfully, curiously)*

# Vagueness

- I had little understanding of his ideas, always ending in distress.

# Idioms

- An **idiom** is an unusual construction or an unexplainable word or combination of words that has become established usage.
- Idioms are common in every language, but they are difficult to explain.
- Try to **avoid them**, mainly for two reasons:
  1. A standard word or expression may better express clarity.
  2. An idiom may be too abstract for practical applications.

# Idioms

- Always strive to use **standard English**. Your writing will be far less likely to be misunderstood.
- Examples:
  - "He was **of the mind** that Chopin was moody, Mozart elegant."

*"He considered Chopin moody, Mozart elegant."*

--"Determining the answer was **out of the question**."

*"Answering was impossible."*

# “there are, there were, there is, there are”

- Easy sentence starters, but **weak** English.

- **Avoid:**

*“There are many elements in his proposal that we cannot accept.”*

- **Instead:**

*“We find many unacceptable elements in his proposal.”*

*“Many elements cannot be accepted.”*

# The Tense of Verbs

- **The tense of verbs** in technical papers is often difficult. But whichever you choose, **be consistent**. Make it all **past** tense or all **perfect** tense.
- For example, in a biomedical manuscript the **past tense is** usually preferable to describe the results of the study under discussion.

*“The report **made** little use of fact, but it **is** (was) interesting. “*



# Avoid using “one” as a pronoun

- It is not incorrect, but it is impersonal and probably can be said differently with improved clarity.
- Using it may invite problems if you are talking about more than one person or incident.
- Instead, try **people, they, we, anyone, you, everyone**. You can also use the **name** of the person referred to.

# Modifiers

- A modifier, whether a single word, a phrase, or a clause, should be as close as possible to the word or words it modifies.

- **Weak:**

*“If we attend dinner at the seminar, a black-tie affair, we cannot return to the hotel until very late.”*

- **Better:**

*“If we attend the black-tie dinner at the seminar, we cannot return to the hotel until very late.”*

# Modifiers

- Here is an example of unintended thoughts because of a misplaced modifier.

- **Weak:**

*“Before he was born, Mr. Henderson’s father wanted his child to be educated abroad.”*

(This states that the father had this desire before he, the father, was born.)

- **Better:**

*“Before Mr. Henderson was born, his father wanted him to be educated abroad.”*

# Modifiers

- Dangling modifiers are usually found at the beginning of a sentence.
- **Weak:**  
*“Swooping low over the house, we heard the plane.”*
- **Better:**  
*“We heard the plane as it swooped low over the house.”*

# Modifier-“Only”

- *Only my cat scratched my arm today.*  
(No other animal did)
- *My only cat scratched my arm today.* (Only one cat)
- *My cat only scratched my arm today.* (No bites)
- *My cat scratched only my arm today.* (Not my face)
- *My cat scratched my only arm today.* (But one arm)
- *My cat scratched my arm only today.* (That recently)
- *My cat scratched my arm today only.* (Never before)

# Weak Modifiers

- **Weak modifiers** are such words as “**fairly, little, pretty, rather, somewhat,**” and they are often overused to intensify words, but needlessly.
- We can presume that when Ernest Hemingway spoke of catching a fish, he didn’t say he caught a huge and gigantic fish. He said, merely, that **he caught a fish**. We need not be reminded that it was “**huge.**” These words are vague and indirect, and they usually fail and **weaken** the writing. **Huge** means one thing to one person, another thing to another.

# Weak Modifiers

- **Weak:**

*“He has become **rather interested** in Ying’s paintings.”*

- What does that mean?
- That he thinks about them sometimes as attractive.
- Or that Ying’s paintings are indeed something to appreciate when seen, side by side with others at a gallery or in a book.
- Or that some are outstanding in the world of art?
- The intended meaning is abstract, unknown, unnecessary.

- **Better:**

*“He has become interested in Ying’s paintings.”*

# Consistency

- This method of writing style is often overlooked. But it is very important. The reader, the most important person in the world to a writer, seeks to readily understand the writer's work. So **don't test the reader.** Don't ask the reader to do anymore than to quickly understand your message.



# Consistency

- If, for example, I speak of “**the professor**” on one page, and the next page it is “**the prof.**,” and the next page “**the Professor,**” or “**the Prof.**,” this will be confusing to the reader. Certainly the meaning of professor, prof., and Professor are all clearly understood. But they **distract.**

# Consistency

- The reader must take time to adjust thinking to intention, to move from one symbol to another, because **all words are symbols**, whether in English, Chinese, Greek, or Swahili. They indicate a subject or an action, so they should be **friendly to the reader**.
- My point is that the writer should use **consistency with symbols, with words**.

# Consistency

- Here are some suggestions on the approach to being consistent, and the first of the alternatives is preferred.
  - May 25** / 25<sup>th</sup> of May / May 25th
  - adviser** / advisor
  - page 36** / Page 36 / page thirty-six
  - nonlife insurance** / non-life insurance
  - nevertheless** / nonetheless
  - indexes** / indices
  - that is** / id est / i.e.
  - red, white, and blue** / red, white and blue

# Avoid Negative Statements

- Write **positively**. Try to avoid negation, even if you must make a negative statement.
- Say it positively. Stating what something is has more clarity than stating what it is not.
- For example, instead of saying  
*“The reaction was not what we had expected,”*  
try this:  
*“The reaction was unexpected.”*

# Avoid Negative Statements

- Consider these positive ways of saying negative things:
  - did not* = ***failed to***
  - do not forget* = ***remember***
  - not clearly* = ***unclearly***
  - not probably* = ***improbable***
  - not sure* = ***unsure***

# Other Tips

- I hope that you have recognized my intents to express **simplicity** in writing. That is sometimes difficult in technical manuscripts, but it can be accomplished little by little, word by word, thought by thought.
- The things you must try to **avoid** include these as starters:
  - Unnecessarily long words
  - Complex constructions
  - Buzzwords and cliches

# Other Tips

- Be **direct** in standard English.

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Use that path. Use the straight line in your writing. **Clarity** and **simplicity** provide the shortest distance between a writer's intention and the reader's understanding.

# Other Tips

- Consider this example:

“The committee was formed to *provide assistance for the placement of students in part-time summer jobs during their three-month vacation.*”
- Try this version instead:

“The committee was formed to *help students find summer jobs.*”



# Conclusion

- **English has only 26 letters, but that fails to make it easy.**