



E 303: TECHNICAL WRITING

School of Literature and Languages

Louisiana Tech University



Interoffice Memo

To: Mr. Merchant's English 303 students
From: Mr. David M. Merchant, English Instructor
Subject: Lecture 17: More on English Usage in Technical Writing?
Date: April 26, 2020

The purpose of this memo is to give an additional discussion on American English usage in the context of writing a white paper.

Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Initialisms

Abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms that are used more than once are included in the glossary to help readers. Even though you spell them out the first time they appear, you put them in the glossary because they may have forgotten what the abbreviation stood for and instead of searching the text for the spelled-out version of it, they can quickly go to the glossary. Remember that if your glossary is one-page long, you put it in the front matter (before the abstract), but if your glossary is more than longer than one page, put it before the references (see page 2 of the white paper assignment instructions memo).

Note that for technical reports (and as your textbook discusses), for each major section ("chapter"), the first time you use an abbreviation, acronym, or initialism in that section you need to spell it out even if you already spelled it out in a previous section and even though you have it in the glossary. **However**, white papers are a bit different. If you were writing a huge report (for example, 40 or more pages), it can be useful to the reader that in each chapter you would spell out the abbreviation even though you have it in the glossary, but for our class, it is OK for you to spell out abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms the first time they appear in your white paper's body (that is, starting with the Executive Summary) and to not spell them out again for repeated instances for the rest of the paper but you do put them in the glossary (exception: an abbreviation, acronym, or initialism that shows up only once in your paper does not go in the glossary (you still spell it out the first instance).

If the abbreviation, acronym, or initialism appears also in the abstract, you will need to spell it out in the abstract as well as the first time it shows up in the body. Why this rule? Because readers of the abstract are probably not going to read the body of the paper and readers of the body are probably not going to read the abstract (as the abstract's audience is different from the white paper's body's audience).

Contractions should not be used in technical writing. The exceptions are contractions used in quoted material and if you are discussing contractions and are using them for examples. In some contexts, like writing a marketing white paper for the public, the use of contractions can help the

paper have a more relaxed feel to it. But for this course, keep the tone more formal and, thus, do not use contractions.

Common Errors From the Definition Assignment

This is not a complete list, of course, but here are some of the most common English usage errors from the last assignment.

- Hyphens and dashes: while the use of them has improved, I think many of you should re-read Section 5.3 in the *English Usage Guide* (starts at the bottom of page 50). Technical writing tends to use hyphens more readily than in other writing contexts. Again, keep in mind your reader may be busy, scanning, English is not their mother tongue, or they are not subject-matter experts (and often are a combination of these factors), and so we need to help them see that two adjectives working as one are working as one, especially if there are several adjectives before the noun—two adjectives working as one can be lost or misread more easily when they are with other adjectives. Of course, you should keep adjective strings as short as you can.
- Lastly: do not use “firstly,” “secondly,” ...and “lastly.” Use “first,” “second,” ... “last” instead. However, you can use “finally.”
- Less versus fewer: “less” is used with noncountable or singular mass nouns (less water, less gas, less hair, less money, less salt, less love) while “fewer” is used with countable nouns (fewer fish, fewer cars, fewer warts, fewer dollars, fewer ingredients, fewer people).
- Plurals: Plural nouns take plural verbs and singular nouns take singular verbs. Plural nouns normally do not take the article “a.” Plurals usually do not use an apostrophe (I saw many instances where a noun was written as a possessive when the writer meant it to be plural). Many other plural noun errors I found were nouns that should be plural but were singular.
- Spacing with punctuation: only one blank space after an end stop (closing period); hyphens and dashes do not have spaces before or after them.
- Spelling: the most common spelling errors I saw were “it” and “in” instead of “is” and “the” instead of “them” or “they.”
- There is/there are: many sentences or phrases with “there is” or “there are” can be rewritten so that you do not need to use “there is” or “there are”; the rewrite will often be shorter. However, sometimes “there is” and “there are” are acceptable. Sometimes you need the phrase to emphasize existence or you just cannot rewrite the sentence without the phrase without the resulting sentence being more awkward. (When I first wrote the preceding sentence, I wrote “There are times when you need the phrase to” but then

quickly rewrote it so that the phrase was not needed.) Grammarly is very good at catching these kinds of errors and giving good advice on how to reword the problematic phrase.

Writing Help

By the old gods and the new, for the love of Pete, or just for goodness sake, use the Writing Help resources at < davidmmerchant.com/writing-help/#OG >; I highly recommend at least using the free version of Grammarly—use its free Word plugin. Again, keep in mind no style checker is perfect because they have difficulty considering context, but they are still quite helpful. Use the Writing Center (you can contact them via email or call them). Find someone to read your paper and encourage them to be honest. Read your paper aloud to yourself (your ear can pick up errors your eyes do not).

Closing

If you have questions, please contact me via email or the course Moodle page (forum or messaging service). Do not forget to do your assigned readings. Again, *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* and writing help are both located at davidmmerchant.com/.