

Words and Phrases

Technical Report Writing

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

- The basis of modern English is old English or Anglo-Saxon, a Germanic language spoken by the invaders of the British Isles in the 5th century AD.
- The pronunciation of old English words differs considerably from that of their modern equivalents.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

- Over a period of time, words stopped being used in a particular context. Instead, they would *crop up* in a new context. This resulted in a change of meaning.
- The word manuscript originally meant ‘that which is written by hand’ (from the Latin ‘manu’, ‘by hand’, and ‘scriptus’, ‘written’), but today it refers also to material written on a typewriter or computer. Another example is the word place. O.E: “open space in a city, market place, square”.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

| <u>Word</u> | <u>Original meaning</u> |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| citizen | city-dweller |
| fellow | associate |
| box | boxwood |
| junk | old rope |
| bead | prayer |

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

- There is another category of words where the meaning has become *restricted*. ‘Wife’ originally meant ‘woman’ but is now restricted to a very special one.

| <u>Word</u> | <u>Original meaning</u> |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| deer | animal |
| meat | food |
| lesson | reading |
| liquor | liquid |

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

- Closely connected with expansion and restriction of meaning is the change whereby a concrete word has taken an abstract meaning, or an abstract term has become more concrete.
- An apposite example is the word humor, which in medieval medicine was thought to be one of the four fluids responsible for one's health and disposition.
- This word now refers to 'temperament' and 'mood'
- Thus shifting from a concrete to an abstract meaning.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

- Through the ages, words have risen or fallen on the social scale by a process called *pejoration and amelioration*.
- In the first instance, words that had a favorable implication may '*degenerate*' in meaning.

Word

silly

foolish

Original meaning

soul

blessed fool

- In modern English, they have acquired such negative connotations that they are virtually banned from polite conversation.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WORDS

- The opposite of this process, that is, *amelioration*, ‘*elevation of meaning*’ also happens.
- Take some commonly used adjectives, like fond, nice, and naughty
- Fond was used by Shakespeare in the sense of foolish.
- Nice (means ignorant) meant stupid, but later acquired a pleasant connotation
- Naughty literally meant ‘naught-like’, that is, worthless, and it meant only that. Later it was used in the sense of wicked, but nowadays it has weakened to a mild term of reproach.

Active and Passive Vocabulary

- Your vocabulary, or the words that you know, can be broadly divided into two categories: active and passive.
- Words that fall into your **active vocabulary** are those that you know well and feel confident about using in your speech and writing.
- Our **passive vocabulary** consists of words that we have heard or read and understand, but do not feel too confident about using.
- To increase your active vocabulary, you must move words from your passive to your active vocabulary by consciously using them.

Active and Passive Vocabulary

- You can also increase your passive vocabulary by reading widely or watching and listening to more serious programs on television and radio.
- An even more systematic way to improve vocabulary is to fit new words in a pattern:
 - Its grammatical class and usage
 - Social situations where it can or cannot be used
 - Its etymology (origin of the word)
 - Its exact meaning and how it relates to words with similar meanings
 - Which other words it combines with

Learning Words by Etymology

If you learn a word by understanding its etymology, then you can learn a string of words at a time.

For example

- ***Pseudo*** means '*false or fake*' and it appears in words like:
 - **Pseudonym**: False name used by authors or artists
 - **Pseudo-intellectual**: pretending to be educated/thinker
- ***Quasi*** means '*approximately*' and it appears in words like:
 - **Quasi-official**: Partially official
 - **Quasi-intellectual**: Having some degree of education
- ***Animus*** means '*mind*' and it appears in words like:
 - **Pusillanimous**: A person who lacks courage
 - **Equanimity**: When a person shows evenness of temper, especially under stress
 - **Magnanimous**: A large-hearted person

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- While writing effectively comes as naturally as breathing to some people, many others struggle with ‘writer’s block’
- Good technical knowledge needs to be packed up by an equally good writing style.
- Broadly speaking, style is the way we write.
- It is not only the ‘what’ of words but also the ‘how’.
- Style varies from one individual to another in the selection, arrangement, and execution of words.
- However, some features of style are common to all good writers.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- *Clarity of thought* is the most important feature of writing style.
- In the words of Walter Wells, ‘There should be no vagueness, not the slightest doubt or confusion over what the message says, not even for an instant’. (1985)
- Before your hands do your work, let your mind do its own.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- The other important factor you must always bear in mind is your *audience*— who are you writing for?
- Considering the topic from the reader's point of view will help you in determining the kind of language you must use, level of formality and so on.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Adaptability

- This is something that does not come naturally to any of us, as when we think of concepts, ideas, and words, we tend to think only from our point of view.
- Whichever word comes to our mind, we immediately give it a form and put it down on paper.
- It might make sense to those whose perception is exactly the same as ours but everyone else would interpret it in a completely different way.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Adaptability

- To adapt your communication, you have to **analyze your audience or receiver.**
- You should be aware of their intelligence level, educational level, and also of their maturity level.
- Knowing all these factors makes it easy for you to select words that will effectively communicate to them. Bearing these aspects in mind, first classify the audience as hi-tech, low-tech, or lay.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

● Adaptability

| Audience Level | Choice of word & phrases | Example |
|----------------|---|---|
| High-tech | Use jargon, acronyms, or abbreviation without explanation. | HCL corrodes pipes. |
| Low-tech | Use jargon, acronyms, or abbreviation with parenthetical definition. | HCL (hydrochloric acid) corrodes pipes. |
| Lay | Avoid jargon, acronyms, and abbreviation. Instead, define technical terms elaborately and give a brief explanation. | Concentrated acid damages the pipes and therefore should not be used. |

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Another aspect of your writing that cannot be neglected is *spelling*.
- Why does spelling matter?
- Many people feel that too much importance is attached to correct spelling.
- Why, for example, should a student writing an exam be penalized for wrong spelling, when he is being evaluated for his knowledge of science or history?

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- But the fact is that spelling is important.
- Incorrect spelling conveys a poor impression of you as a communicator.
- It distracts the reader from getting your message.
- Worse, it can convey the wrong meaning or no meaning at all.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Often one word is confused with another which it somewhat resembles. This is called *malapropism*.
- Some examples of malapropism are the following:
 - When should I accept you next? (expect)
 - An ellipse of the sun occurred only yesterday. (eclipse)
 - A memorial battle was fought at Quebec in 1757. (memorable)
 - Gladiators are iron things which give out heat. (radiators)
 - Centimetre is an insect with hundred legs. (centipede)

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Clarity
 - The aim of good technical writing is clarity
 - If your memos, letters, and reports are unclear, you have wasted your reader's time.
 - Clarity can be achieved by providing specific details, writing in the active rather than passive voice, and avoiding acronyms, jargon, and obscure words.
 - Choose precise, concrete, and familiar words.
 - Construct effective sentences and paragraphs.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- *Economy of words* is the third factor you should bear in mind.
- Selecting the word that fits best into the context, avoiding wordiness, and using one's judgment in deciding the appropriate length of sentences and paragraphs all go into making your writing a piece of effective communication.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Economy
 - Wordy sentences are like a maze in which your readers can get lost.
 - Worse, they might give up reading your correspondence altogether, or merely skim through it.
 - On the other hand, economy with words will make your writing understandable and appealing.
 - This will enhance readers' interest and involvement.

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

□ Economy

- Look at this wordy sentence: “*To learn the functioning of the machinery, you should not perfunctorily read the brochure, rather, perspicacious learning will enable you to know the exactness of functioning*”.
- Does this sentence clearly convey its meaning?
- Obviously not, because it contains far too many words, several of them unfamiliar as well.
- The better version is... “*To know the functioning of the machinery you have to vet the brochure thoroughly rather than go through it cursorily*”.
- Can you do better?

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

- Economy
 - As the writer, it is up to you to decide how long or short your sentences should be, depending on the complexity of the subject.
 - Nevertheless, bear in mind that long sentences hinder comprehension.
 - As a general guideline, a paragraph need not contain more than 50 words.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

The following guidelines will help you to achieve clarity and economy in your writing.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

□ Use Familiar Words

- An important element in the use of words is the selection of familiar words— words that are commonly used in daily language.
- Here one must rely on one's judgement to decide which words are more familiar.
- A rule of thumb is to avoid stiff and difficult words as far as possible.
- For example, instead of using the word *annihilate*, use *destroy*, instead of using *corroborate*, use *verify* and say outdated instead of antiquated.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Familiar Words
 - Many writers fall into the trap of using high-sounding, pompous words in the belief that this makes their works more impressive.
 - In fact, such writing confuses the reader.
 - Particularly in business and technical communication, there is no room for such writing.
 - The rapid pace of work life today demands that writing be informal in tone, brief precise, and easy to grasp.
 - The writer must keep in mind the target readers and cater to the lowest common denominator of this group.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

□ Use Familiar Words

A famous lecturer was once asked the formula of success in public speaking.

‘Well’, he said, ‘in promulgating your esoteric cogitations and articulating superficial, sentimental and psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your extemporaneous decantation and unpremeditated expatiations have intelligibility and veracious veracity without rodomontade and thrasonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity pusillanimous vacuity and similar transgressions. Or to put it a bit differently,’ he concluded,

‘talk simply, naturally, and above all, don’t use my words’!

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Familiar Words
 - The following examples show you how sentences can be simplified using familiar expressions.
 - Example 1
 - Original: Antiquated machinery was utilized for experimentation.
 - Revised: Old machines were used for the test.
 - Example 2
 - Original: Company operations for the preceding accounting period terminated with substantial deficit.
 - Revised: The company lost much money last year.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Concrete and Specific Words
 - Concrete and specific words are always preferable to abstract words.
 - Concrete words permit a limited interpretation and convey more definite meaning.
 - They tend to be more forceful, direct, and to the point, while abstract words tend to be general and vague, and digress from the point.
 - Good business communication is marked by words that have clear meanings.
 - Concrete words stand for things that exist in the real world, like chair, desk, automobile, flowers, the Taj Mahal, and so on.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Concrete and Specific Words
 - Abstract words, on the other hand, cover broad meanings—concepts, ideas, and feelings.
 - Instead of saying ‘*The company suffered a tremendous loss in the second quarter of last year*’, it would make more sense to directly say “*The company suffered a 70% loss in profits in the second quarter of last year*”.
 - Quantifying the loss in the above example makes the information more useful and creates a better impact. Otherwise, it hardly conveys much meaning.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Concrete and Specific Words
 - Sometimes a sentence is correct in grammatical construction but can be interpreted in a number of ways.
 - This is called structural ambiguity.
 - For example, ‘Lying at the bottom of the pool, I saw a gold coin.’
 - Similarly ambiguity arises because of choice of words—the word you have selected has multiple meanings.
 - This is called lexical ambiguity.
 - For example, The giant plant collapsed damaging many buildings.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Concrete and Specific Words
 - Here is a list of some commonly used ambiguous words you should avoid:
 - Nice
 - Big
 - All right
 - Picture
 - Any time
 - Adequate
 - Quite a bit
 - Progress

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

● Use Concrete and Specific Words

- The examples below show you how ambiguous words and phrases can be substituted to sound specific and clear:

Abstract

An industrial worker

Furniture

Good attendance record

The leading company

The majority

In the near future

Substantial amount

Concrete

A welder

An arm chair

100% attendance record

First among 3928 companies

73%

By Thursday noon

Rs 1,98,00,000

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Abbreviations Sparingly
 - An abbreviation is formed by combining the first letter of each word in a phrase.
 - For example, WHO is the abbreviation for World Health Organization.
 - We are all familiar with other abbreviations like FBI (*Federal Bureau of Investigation*), POTA(*Prevention of Terrorism Act*), PAF (*Pakistan Air Force*), and IBM (*International Business Machines*).

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Use Abbreviations Sparingly
 - While working in your chosen field, you will learn its technical terms and abbreviations.
 - In due course, you will use these terms and abbreviations freely in communicating with people in the same area of work.
 - While abbreviations help you to achieve brevity and are necessary in technical documents, too much dependence on them leads to loss of clarity.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

□ Use Abbreviations Sparingly

- Whether you are writing a technical document or sending an informal electronic mail, to avoid turning your document into gobbledygook, remember the following:
 - Introduce abbreviations the first time you use them by defining them in full, parenthetically.
 - Restrict the number of abbreviations in individual sentences.
 - When addressing non-expert readers, try to avoid using more than one abbreviation in a sentence.
 - Use the full term for an abbreviation when beginning a new section or when the term has not been used for several pages in your technical document.
 - If you are using many potentially confusing abbreviations, define them in a separate glossary (an alphabetized list of terms, followed by their definitions).

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Clichés
 - Clichés are overused words and phrases that have lost their appeal.
 - Just as nobody likes to use a coin worn out by constant use, similarly nobody likes hackneyed, once-fashionable phrases that add little or no meaning to what we say.
 - Some well-known clichés are: food for thought, teeming millions, last but not the least, fishing in troubled waters, and to burn the midnight oil.
 - Writing becomes unimpressive and stale when you resort to an indiscriminate usage of clichés. Hence avoid using them in your technical communication.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

□ Avoid Clichés

□ Example 1

- Original: The report discusses threadbare the problem of Air Pollution in Pakistan,

□ Revised: The report discusses the problem of Air Pollution in Pakistan in detail

□ Example 2

- Original: The Engineers left no stones unturned to construct the bridge in time.

- Revised: The Engineers worked very hard to construct the bridge in time.

□ But remember a few clichés convey the idea so effectively that it becomes extremely difficult to improve upon them or think of a substitute.

□ So the key is, if you find a cliché which best expresses your meaning, then use it unhesitatingly.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Excessive Use of Jargon
 - Jargon is defined as ‘language full of technical or special words’.
 - Every profession has its own jargon.
 - Doctors communicate with each other in medical terms which are seldom understood by the common man.
 - Similarly software professionals, resort to the use of computer-related jargon.
 - The use of jargon is acceptable so long as the communication takes place among colleagues in the same field or profession.
 - But to sustain the interest of a large readership it is necessary to minimize or avoid the use of jargon since the reader may not be a specialist in the subject.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Excessive Use of Jargon
 - It is undoubtedly difficult to communicate technical matter in non-technical language.
 - But the ability to do so can be acquired with practice.
 - Jargon is most often used on the false premise that complex ideas cannot be expressed without the use of highly technical language.
 - But, in effect, jargon only helps to widen the semantic gap between the professional and the layman.
 - One of the hallmarks of effective communication is its ability to reach a population larger than that for which it is intended.
 - If such is the goal, excessive use of jargon has little role to play.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Excessive Use of Jargon

- The following rules will help you while using Jargon:

- When a word or a phrase from the general vocabulary expresses your thought as well and as precisely as a specialized term, always use the general term.
- Even if the specialized term is more precise and economical than the general term, do not use it unless you are sure that the reader would understand it.
- When you have to use the specialized term repeatedly, define it carefully at its first appearance.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Excessive Use of Jargon
 - The following ‘examples show some technical jargon and the corresponding meaning for laypersons:

Technical Jargon

Accrued interest

Annual premium

Assessed valuation

Charge to your principal

Conveying title

Maturity date

Per diem

Mach-2

Catalysis

composition of a substance

Familiar Expressions

Unpaid insurance

Annual payment

Value of property for tax

Increase balance of your loan

Signing and recording a deed

Final payment date

Daily

Twice the speed of sound

Accelerated decomposition or

composition of a substance

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Foreign Words and Phrases
 - Like jargon, some writers use foreign words and phrases to flabbergast readers and to impress them about the writer's scholarship.
 - Such phrases are falsely believed to impart a sense of dignity to the writing.
 - It makes little sense to use words like *vide supra* or *raison d'etre* in place of better understood English equivalents like 'see above' and 'the justification for' respectively.
 - Some foreign words are unavoidable and are also universally understood and accepted.
 - Some examples are: etc. (etcetera), i.e. (id est), e.g. (exempli gratia), a.m. (ante meridiem), p.m. (post meridian), and so on . It is not wrong therefore to use such words or phrases.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

□ Avoid Redundancy and Circumlocution

- Often it is seen that writers tend to use unnecessary words or resort to needless repetition of an idea.
- This makes the writing redundant.
- *Redundancy* is the part of a message that can be eliminated without loss of much information.
- Some examples of redundancy are—the superfluous words are italicized—*basic* fundamentals, return *back*, adequate *enough*, resume *again*, *the month* of May, *few in number*, *detailed* perusal, true *fact* and so on.
- Superfluity in writing is also brought about by beating around the bush or writing in a circumlocutory or roundabout fashion.
- In these cases the entire sentence needs to be rewritten in order to make it crisp and precise.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

□ Avoid Redundancy and Circumlocution

□ Examples

- Original: Unemployment decline, which has continued over the past four months, indicates that the recession has bottomed and the upturn in the economy is a fact.
- Revised: The strong reversal of unemployment trends indicates an improvement in the economy.
- Original: It is not believed that the proposed design will meet all the required specifications based on the previous test experiences obtained in the laboratory
- Revised: Lab tests indicate that the proposed design will not meet all requirements.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Discriminatory Writing
 - In today's all-inclusive society, it is wrong on a writer's part to alienate a section of the masses through the usage of discriminatory words.
 - Such writing is offensive and does not speak well of the author's open-mindedness.
 - All too prevalent are sexist words—words that differentiate people based on their sex.
 - Although this form of discrimination can be against both sexes, most instances involve discrimination against women, the reason being that a large number of words suggest male superiority and chauvinism.

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

- Avoid Discriminatory Writing
 - A sentence like ‘A student in KMC does his homework well before coming to class’ shows a sexist bias, considering the fact that KMC is a co-educational institute!
 - The use of masculine pronouns can be eliminated in three ways:
 - Rewording the sentence: ‘A student in KMC does the assigned homework well before coming to classes.’
 - By making a dual reference: ‘A student in KMC does his or her home work .
 - Make the reference plural: ‘Students in KMC do their homework ...’

GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVENESS

● Avoid Discriminatory Writing

- Words that stereotype by race, nationality or sexual orientation must also be avoided.
- Statements like ‘Jews are miserly’, ‘Muslims are jihad-lovers’, ‘Negroes do menial jobs’, ‘Harijans are meant to be suppressed’, ‘Italians are Mafia members’, and ‘Gays are perfectionists’ do no good to enhance the writer’s image.
- Also, it is no longer acceptable to use words that stereotype by age or typecast people with disabilities.
- Terms like ‘deaf and dumb’, ‘mentally retarded’, and ‘handicapped’ sound highly insensitive.
- Gentler and more humane words like ‘physically challenged’ or ‘mentally challenged’ convey the same meaning but with a greater degree of sensitivity

Conclusion

- Choosing simple words
- Using words with precision
- Making a conscientious effort to express yourself plainly
- Say what you mean and no more
- Frills and verbal tricks, unfamiliar words, inflated or worn out phrases, and needless repetition should not be allowed to creep into your writing.
- In the words of Charles C. Cotton, ‘The writer does the most, who gives the reader the most information and takes from him the least time’.



THE END