

Professional Writing Style

Greg Donohoe

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Professional communication should be direct and simple, as if you were explaining the work to a colleague. Say what you mean, mean what you say, and be concise.

Guiding principle: “Don’t make me think!”

A technical report must be persuasive as well as informative

- Persuade the reader that the work is important and worth continued support

Effective communication flows easily

- Tell a little story – A leads to B, and to C, and inevitably to D (our solution)
- Make it easy on the reader: eliminate clutter.

Cluttered: “Of the kinds of fasteners that we could have used, instead of screws or nails, we chose tacks made of brass to hold the lid on because they don’t rust.”

Cleaner: “We fastened the lid with rust-proof brass tacks.”

Get to the point right away – don’t build up to it with a lot of background, or you’ll lose your reader.

Avoid repetition (redundancy). It interrupts the flow. Well-structure writing doesn’t need it.

State the facts – don’t embellish or use hyperbole (intentional exaggeration)

Exaggeration: “We had to wait forever for the results.”

Fact: “We received the results in three weeks, which was two weeks later than promised.”

Hyperbole: “The results of the experiment were incredible.”

What does *incredible* mean? It’s the opposite of *credible*!

Fact: “The results of the experiment exceeded expectations. We expected to generate 7 volts, but in fact measured 10.3 to 11.5 volts.”

Use neutral, non-judgmental language. In the example above, I was going to label examples “**Bad**”, “**Better**”, “**Bad**”, and “**Good**”, but decided to label them “**Exaggeration**”, “**Hyperbole**”, and “**Fact**”. Why is judgmental language not advised?

1. It’s ambiguous. Not everyone agrees on what “good” and “bad” mean. Everybody knows the difference between 7 volts and 10.3 volts.
2. Judgmental language can be inflammatory, provoking hostility or defiance in the reader.

Avoid brand names when you are referring to something more general.

Not: “The fat end of the chord is plugged into Avista.”

But: “The fat end of the chord is plugged into a source of 110V AC line voltage.”

Flow

Don't refer to something before you have defined it or described it.

Acronyms: define them on first use e.g. Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA). Afterwards, you can just say FPGA.

Use good grammar. It makes your writing so much clearer.

Reference: *The Elements of Style*, Wm. Strunk and E.B. White, New York: Longman, 2000.

Documenting Projects

Teamwork: agree on terminology, and everybody stick to it

- Names of things
- Modules, signals, variables