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Principles of Technical Writing

There are several valuable principles that guide technical writers in forging a lively, concise, and individual way of expressing ideas. Here are some key principles of technical composition.

Rule 1. Use the active voice.

Passive

Dolphins were taught by researchers in Hawaii to learn new behavior.

Active

Researchers in Hawaii taught dolphins to learn new behavior.

Rule 2. Use plain rather than elegant or complex language.

Complex

Another very important consequence of Einstein's theory of special relatively that does not follow from classical mechanics is the prediction that even when a body having mass is at rest, and hence has no kinetic energy, there still remains a fixed and constant quantity of energy within this body.

Simple

According to the theory of special relatively, even a body at rest contains energy.

Rule 3. Delete words, sentences, and phrases that do not add to your meaning.

Wordy

In the majority of cases, the data provided by direct examination of fresh material under the lens of the microscope are insufficient for the proper identification of bacteria.

Concise

Often, bacteria cannot be identified under the microscope.

Rule 4. Use specific and concrete terms rather than generalities.

Not Specific

Our measurements are not precise because the experimental apparatus was in poor condition.



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Specific

Our weight measurements are not precise because the scale was not working properly.

Rule 5. Use the past tense to describe your experimental work and results

Samantha used a mixing valve to create a liquid-liquid dispersion.

Rule 5. In most other writing, use the present tense.

Past tense

Crystals would form from fusion if the temperature or pressure was high.

Present tense

Crystals form from fusion at a high temperature or high pressure.

Rule 6. Make the technical depth of your writing compatible with the background of your reader.

For the general public

software programs that run the computer system

For engineers

operating system

Rule 7. Break up your writing into short sections.

Long sentence

This chapter explains the work items, procedures, checkpoints, and so forth involved in XYZ sales, design, installation/system conversion, and operation to prevent overlooking work items and can be used as a reference to estimate the number of man-hours, etc.

Broken-up sentences

This chapter explains work items, procedures, checkpoints, and other matters involved in XYZ sales, design, installation/system conversion, and operation. Reading this chapter will help keep you from overlooking work items. The chapter can also be used as a reference when estimating person-hours.

Rule 8. Keep ideas and sentence structure parallel.

Nonparallel

Please sign the proposal, date it, and it must be sent to me.

Parallel



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Please sign the proposal, date it, and send it to me.

Rule 9. Opt for an informal rather than a formal style.

Formal

For the purpose of breaking up a beam of sunlight into the seven visible colors of the spectrum, a glass prism was procured.

Informal

I used a prism to break up sunlight into a rainbow.

Reference

The Elements of Technical Writing

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