The Technical Writing Workshop

How to write Technical Documentation
in English

By

Declan Madden

Språkbruket Education AB

The Technical Writing Workshop

Contact: Declan Maden

Språkbruket Education AB

Mobil: +46 703260791

Email: sprakbruket.educ@tele2.se

Web: www.spred.se

Read about The Technical Writing Workshop here:

http://www.spred.se/tww.htm

Technical writing pointers for my LinkedIn contacts

Earlier this year I was invited to do a lecture on technical writing for documentation at the FTI conference which was held in Uppsala.
FTI is the Swedish society of technical communicators.

I did a lecture some years ago for the society on the most frequent errors made by Swedich technical writers who write technical documentation in English.

But this time I focused on the errors that nobody sees!
Why? Because the sentences are not wrong – but they don't mean what the writer, or the controlling editor, think they mean! These errors slip through software checkers and manual editors and cause multiple translation problems.
 So I hope you enjoy! I'm afraid the lecture was not audio recorded, but I'm sure you will be able to follow the lecture anyway. If not, get in touch.

Happy reading

Declan Madden

The Technical Writing Workshop is specially designed to train technical communicators how to write technical documentation in English. It is suitable for beginners as well as experienced technical writers. More than 650 technical communicators/writers have taken part. The course consists of 4 days (2x2) plus 6 distance written assignments. The course is run as an open course or an in-house course. It has been run in Stockholm, Västerås, Linköping, Uppsala, Malmö and many other locations. Most of the larger consultancies that offer technical writing services send their personnel to the course.

Since the course started, 4500 distance assignments have been sent in by course participants for detailed analysis and pedagogical feedback. These are "real" technical writing assignments. The requirement is to produce a professional document that would be suitable for publication in a technical manual.

Despite the growing efficiency of software editing and machine translation, there is still a very long way to go before they will be good enough. Technical information is still written by people. Swedish Technical Communicators are very competent and talented and I admire them for their writing skills and their proficiency.

The FTI lecture begins on the next slide.

Watch your language!

Write right, right from the start.

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Quality requirements in technical writing

Precise

Specific

Correct

Concise

Clear

Readable

Complete

Consistent

The English Language

- in technical documentation

problems, errors, misunderstandings, mistakes

- 40%   grammar, syntax, etc.
- 60 %   structure and wording of the information

- Everything you write should sound natural to a native speaker.
    - Global English Style Guide

How good is your "system", style guide, translation software, etc?

- Who writes the technical information that is put into your system?

- Who decides if the English is right or wrong, suitable or not?

- Who maintains, edits and uppdates the <u>language</u> in your system?

- Are they good? How do you know?

Everything begins with the language!

Everything depends on you!

On the slides that follow, many of the red texts are **not** errors in grammar, vocabulary, or syntax. They are correctly written sentences.

But they don't mean what the writer thinks they mean!
The blue texts are what the writer INTENDED to write!

Other (red) examples are structures that are correct,
but **not** correct in technical documentation!

- Turn the lever into a vertical position.
Turn the lever to a vertical position.
The ugly frog turned into a handsome prince.

- Remove the screws that hold the housing.
Remove the screws that hold the housing in position.

- Terminate the repair work by…
Finish/Complete the repair work by…

- Move the machine so that the inlet valve can be accessed from the back of…
Move the machine to access the inlet valve…

- Change the cable on the lamp switch.
Replace the cable on the lamp switch.

- Open the switch's housing and unscrew…
Open the housing of the switch and unscrew…
Open the switch housing and unscrew…

- Caution: It is important that the wires in the switch are tightly attached.
Caution: Attach the wires tightly in the switch. Loose wires can cause a short circuit.

- Check that the O-rings are not damaged.
Check if the O-rings are damaged. **or,** Examine the O-rings for damage.

- Put the brown and blue wires into their respective terminal contacts.
Put the brown wire and the blue wire into the correct terminal contacts.

- Tighten the screws properly.
Tighten the screws fully.

- Make sure the plug has been pulled out of the wall socket.
  Pull out the plug from the wall socket.

- Make sure that the switch works as intended. – **Impossible!**
  Switch the lamp on and off to test the function of the switch.

- Make sure not to damage the wires inside the cable.
  Do not damage the wires inside the cable.

- Make sure the screws sit tightly.
  Tighten the screws fully.

- The screws shall touch the copper conductors.
  The screws must touch the copper conductors.

- Pull out the plug completely from the wall socket.
  Pull out the plug from the wall socket.

- Avoid damaging the wires inside the housing.
  Do not damage the wires inside the housing.

- Cut off any sprawling copper strands.

- Prior to operating the electric motor, …
- Before operating the electric motor, …

- There can still be water pressure in the rubber hose.
  There **is** water pressure in the rubber hose.

- Shut off the water supply to the tank.
  Turn off the water supply to the tank.

- Reconnect the power supply by putting the plug into the wall socket.
  (Repetition: same thing written twice.)
  Put the plug into the wall socket.

- Remove the boxes from the pallet in the same manner as in the previous step.
  Repeat step 5 to remove the boxes from the pallet.

- It is recommended to use an adjustable spanner.
  An adjustable spanner is recommended.

- Grab the filter with the pliers.
  Hold/Grip the filter with the pliers.

- Stick the board under the washing machine and …
  Put the board under the washing machine and…

- Remove the filter which is found inside the inlet pipe.
  Remove the filter from the inlet pipe.

- Caution: If the filter is damaged, it must be replaced.
  Caution: If the filter is damaged, replace it.

- Protect the plastic nut from being damaged....
  Protect the nut from damage…

- Unscrew the plastic nut using hand power.
  Unscrew the plastic nut with your hand (by hand).

- The nut should be turned clockwise.
  Turn the nut clockwise.

- Fix the rotor blade in the vice.
  Tighten/Clamp the rotor blade in the vice.

The slides that follow include advice on:

- gender language which has become a sensitive matter in the English speaking world
- writing concise, accurate sentences
- grammar
- parallel structure
- translation

Gender words

All professions/roles/titles that include "man" have changed to a neutral alternative.
Do not write "he" or "he/she". Try to use plural "they" only.

salesman	*salesperson*
serviceman	*service technician*
chairman	*chairperson*
foreman	*supervisor, team leader*
fireman	*fire fighter, rescue officer*
policeman	*police officer*
postman	*postal worker*
man-made	*synthetic*
man hours	*staff hours*

Which of the sentences has a greater impact on the reader?

Gas welding refers to the use of an oxy-acetylene flame as the thermal source required for welding, and involves the burning of acetylene in an oxygen-enriched atmosphere to create a high-temperature flame.

In gas welding, acetylene is burned with oxygen to give a high temperature flame.

Can you break up these sentences?

The first sentence is too long and wordy.

"The edge is elevated two centimetres and is two centimetres wide on all sides except the front where it is elevated by one centimetre and is five millimetres wide."

The sentence below has a large chunk of information stuck into the middle.

- "At the shunt, which is controlled by the thermostat that measures the room temperature and the thermostat that measures the water temperature in the hot water tank, the hot water takes different directions depending on where heat is needed."

Shorter, better, by <u>combining information</u>

Don't just <u>join </u>sentences together.
Analyse the <u>information</u> in each sentence – try combining the <u>information</u> instead of just the words!

Original

Twist the strands of each wire tightly together so there are no loose strands. This is important in order to avoid a short circuit when using the assembled plug.

Combined

To prevent a short circuit in the plug, twist all the loose strands of each wire tightly together.

Write correct, <u>complete</u> grammar structures and sentences.

A cryptic warning
Risk of cuts! Wear gloves!
Wear gloves in step 5. Sharp edges can cause cuts.

A "telegraphic" instruction
Repeat using the second tyre lever.

Repeat step 3 using the second tyre lever.

Verbs: the "–ing" form

Cannot be used as a <u>main verb</u> in instructions, etc.

*Use the **simple present** tense only.*

Incorrect:

"Reduce the speed of the drum while it is rotating."

Correct:

"Reduce the speed of the drum while it rotates."

"When the room has reached the desired temperature, the radiator thermostat...

Do not use past time, only the present:

"When the room reaches the desired temperature, the radiator thermostat...

*One of the most important **structural** requirements in technical documentation.*

Faulty parallel structure:

☐   The computer instruction contains a fetch, initiate and execute stage.

Correct parallel structure:

☐   The computer instruction contains a fetch stage,

an initiate stage and an execute stage.

☐   The computer instruction contains the following three stages:
fetch, initiate, and execute.

Commas

There are 8 specific uses for commas in technical writing text. Do you know what they are?

Commas are critical because they can distort the <u>information</u> if they are not used correctly.

shall, shall be, should, should be, must, must be

*Incorrect usage is one of the most frequent **Swenglish** errors in instructions and technical documentation.*

Do not write:

All the washers shall be in the same order as they were before the blade was removed.

Write:

Place the washers in the correct order.

For translation to be successful, the original text must be top quality!

Is there variation within your:

Document groups, Manuals, Companies/Organisations, Projects, Translation, Outsourcing at home and internationally…

Which do Swedish writers prefer? Why?

"**Prevent** damage to the plastic parts by…"
"**Avoid** damage to the plastic parts by…"

The Swedish businessman wanted to say:

"Vi arbetar **mot** våra kunder." (mot = towards/against)

But unfortunately he said:

"We work against our customers."

Hope you found this interesting.

There are still places available on
The Technical Writing Workshop

Malmö: 16-17 Oct and 20-21 Nov.
Stockholm: 23-24 Oct and 27-28 Nov.
Linköping: 6-7 Nov and 11-12 Dec.
The course consists of 4 course days and 6 distance assignments.

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