

Campus Academic Resource Program

Concision and Tone in Technical Writing

This handout will:

- Explain tone in technical writing.
- Express the limitations of clichés and idioms.
- Investigate format in technical writing.
- Discuss concision in technical writing.
- Explore transitions in technical writing.

I. Tone

Tone is the attitude toward the subject and the audience in a piece of literary work. Tone is dependent on what the writer wants the reader to feel. A poem may have a somber tone. A chapter in a book may be ironic. A poorly written study guide may have a condescending tone.

- The tone in technical writing is professional.
 - The writing should be focused on specific ideas and have direct solutions.

Example Mission Statement:

Hall's Hard Candies founded in 1933 seeks to find the healthiest and tastiest alternative to satisfy your sweet tooth! Hall's small candies are light, airy, and accessible to those on the move, whether you are running to your corner office or on a jog through the park. Our candies will leave you feeling happy and guilt-free!

Example for Revision:

Paragraph:

*Hall's Hard Candies **is really into** the fitness oriented community **that it is in** and **in doing so** it offers **a lot of flavors** and **a lot of types of** candies to make. Recent studies have found that its best-selling candy **may not be as good for you** as originally thought and has 10 grams of sugar in a 17 gram candy (Jones, 2014, 8). **It would be a good idea** for Hall's to discontinue the candy and to send out an apology email to its mailing list. Hall's should include how much sugar is in its other candies to prove its love of healthy eating.*

Note: This example includes information about a business, its mission statement, evidence, and solutions but adopts an unprofessional tone that could hamper the strength of the writing.

Notice that throughout the paragraph, the author uses prepositions like (in, into, to, and of) as well as quantifiers (a lot), and uncertain verbs (may and would). These words create an unprofessional tone by making the sentences vague and indirect.

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Revised Example:

Paragraph:

Hall's Hard Candies ***offers an assortment of candies directed towards an active community.*** However, ***a recent study found*** that its best-selling candy contains 10 grams of sugar in a 17 gram candy (Jones, 2014, 8). ***Therefore,*** for Hall's to satisfy its mission statement and commitment to the well-being of its customers, the company should release an apology email to its mailing list. Hall's should ***also*** include the sugar content of its other candies to assuage customer's possible concerns of Hall's other candies.

Note: This example presents similar information but utilizes concision, transitions, and a more professional tone.

To ensure your tone adopts a professional manner, it is important to use prepositions (in, to, into) sparingly, instead replacing them with the subject/object being discussed. Also, notice the more direct verbs being used (offers, found, satisfy, release, assuage). Being specific and using direct verbs will give your writing a more professional tone.

However, it is possible to revise this paragraph even more so. Note the third sentence written down below:

Sentence: *Therefore, for Hall's to satisfy its mission statement and commitment to the well-being of its customers, the company should release an apology email to its mailing list.*

The phrase *satisfy its mission statement and commitment to the well-being of its customers* is repetitive and could be rendered even more concise to *satisfy its commitment to the well-being of its customers* or *satisfy its mission statement*.

- For technical writing to obtain a professional tone, the writing should be courteous and sincere.

Example Email:

Dear Jane,

Thank you for your interest in the position. We are excited to inform you that Hall's Hard Candies would like you to ***welcome to our team!***

Please find attached the next necessary steps to confirm your employment.

Sincerely,

Diane

- Confidence is also important. Avoid phrases of uncertainty like: "might be" or "perhaps." Using those phrases causes the reader to question your evidence, analysis, and findings.

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Example for Revision:

I think it **might be** in the best interest of Bob's Bicycle Buyback to **perhaps** think about opening another location in Sausalito so that avid bicyclists can easily access bikes for the Paradise Loop.

Revised Example:

Bob's Bicycle Buyback **should open** a location in Sausalito **to enter the market of bicyclists interested in the Paradise Loop**, the Bay Area's third most popular route (strava.com).

- As long as evidence is provided for your direction, your writing should be confident.
- Technical writing should be assured and unwavering.
- Using objective language is another necessary tool to develop the professional tone. The language should be objective, not influenced by personal views. By writing in an objective form, the reader is more likely going to consider your ideas.

Clichés and Idioms

- Clichés and Idioms in technical writing are ineffective.
 - Clichés are common expressions or phrases that have been overused.
 - *Do more with less*
 - *Take it to the next level*
 - *Let's circle back*
 - *Out of pocket*
 - *Bite the bullet*
 - *At the end of the day*
 - *Think outside the box*
 - *Par for the course*
 - Idioms are overused figurative language unique to every culture and language.
 - *Actions speak louder than words*
 - *Add insult to injury*
 - *Best of both worlds*
 - *Cut corners*
 - *On the ball*
 - *You can't judge a book by its cover*
 - *Go the extra mile*
 - *Crunch time*
 - *No brainer*
- Clichés and Idioms should never be in an academic paper.
 - Clichés and Idioms are acceptable in every day conversation. They generalize ideas and are sometimes humorous.
 - Our familiarity with clichés and idioms causes us to use them in essays.
 - Clichés and idioms are dull and unoriginal

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- Clichés and idioms are vague and their meaning has diminished over time.
- Clichés and idioms are informal, unprofessional, and weak.
- Clichés and Idioms can be replaced by trying these steps.
 - Ask yourself what you are trying to say in the sentence.
 - Simplify the language.
 - Isolate phrases or expressions and investigate if they are clear.

Example: Below are examples of sentences that use clichés or idioms and their revised forms. Both the clichés and idioms and their revised grammatical choices are underlined.

1. *Sam's report on Applebee's was not up to par with the standard that is expected in college.*
 - a. *Sam's report on Applebee's fell below the standards expected in college.*
2. *Elizabeth's report was the bee's knees. She has had a chip on her shoulder since preschool.*
 - a. *Elizabeth's report met our expectations. She has consistently produced strong work in school since she failed preschool.*

Example:

1. *For T.J.'s Eyeglasses and Optical Aid to get the most bang for its buck it should hire a web designer to make its website more accessible to older users.*
 - a. *T.J.'s Eyeglasses and Optical Aid should hire a web designer to develop a more accessible website for its target audience, older users.*

Activity 1 -- Clichés & Idioms: Circle the cliché or idiom in each sentence. Then, rewrite the sentence without it.

1. The Bellagio hotel's mission statement encourages employees to think outside of the box.

2. Keegan was not working hard enough, so his boss asked him to go the extra mile.

3. Jenny is a wonderful gymnast, some people even called her a diamond in the rough

4. Alice felt like she had bitten off more than she could chew, and could not focus because of it.

II. Format

Format is the basic structure of one's writing. The format in technical writing is different than other forms of writing for majors such as History and English.

- The introduction in technical writing should be brief.
 - Do not begin with the origin of joint-stock companies.

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- The introduction should be specific about your topic and give an overview which does not bore your reader or delay your ideas, evidence, and analysis.
- A statement of purpose is normally the last sentence in an introduction.
- The statement of purpose should be written in a clear and concise manner.
- Only the main points should be in the statement of purpose.
- Any extraneous information or ideas will confuse your reader and muddle your direction.
- The statement of purpose directs your entire paper; similarly, a topic sentence directs your body paragraph. The topic sentence is an overview of the idea covered in the paragraph.
 - The sentence needs to balance vagueness and specificity. A too vague topic sentence will not provide enough direction for the paragraph. An overly specific topic sentence will limit the analysis and evidence included in the paragraph. A well written topic sentence will have a specific direction that allows an idea to be fully thought through.
- A body paragraph should have one main point expressed in it.
 - The one main point should be supported by primary and secondary sources which is indicative of the relevance of the main point.
 - A strong main point will have enough supporting evidence to analyze which provides the basis for the statement of purpose. Main points should be completely and thoroughly analyzed.
 - However, body paragraphs should not extend to or beyond a page. Multiple body paragraphs are acceptable as long as the idea is cohesive and is completely explored.
- A conclusion should be concise.
 - The conclusion brings together the main points of the body paragraphs. The compilation of main points throughout the paper should support your statement of purpose.

III. Concision

Concision is about being brief but comprehensive.

- Concision is not just using the fewest words it is about using the most effective words.
 - For technical writing, concision is central to one's writing.
 - A reader of a technical essay is looking for a clear statement of purpose with evidence and analysis to prove the statement of purpose.
 - Anything else is extra and distracts the reader from the important aspects of the paper. Some common issues with concision are listed below.

A. "To be" verbs

"To be" verbs (is, am, being, been) should be limited. Instead replace "to be" verbs with active, strong verbs. Eliminate the "to be" verb and replace the noun form with the verb form. This strengthens the writing and eliminates unnecessary words.

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Example: Below are examples of sentences with “to be” verbs and their corrected forms. Both the “to be” verbs and the active, strong verbs are underlined.

- a. To Be: *This work is a generalization of Jane’s earlier plan.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *This work generalizes Jane’s earlier plan.*
- b. To Be: *This approach is an improvement of Bob’s design.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *This approach improves Bob’s design*
- c. To Be: *Ralph’s Falafel Shoppe was being outsold by another local Mediterranean restaurant Amir’s Turkish Delights.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *Mediterranean restaurant Amir’s Turkish Delights outsells Ralph’s Falafel Shoppe.*
- d. To Be: *Lilly’s Hotels were losing money during their renovation and should therefore raise rates to pay for the loss in money.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *Lilly’s Hotels suffered losses during their renovation and should therefore raise rates to compensate for that.*

Note: “suffered” is a strong word with specific connotations that may not be applicable to a sentence in business writing. Instead the sentence below expresses the same information with less negative, charged connotations.

 - b. Revised Sentence: *Lilly’s Hotels experienced losses during their renovation and should therefore raise rates to compensate for that.*

B. Repetitive and unnecessary words

If words are workers in your business essay, extraneous workers are let go. Each word should have a distinct purpose. Words that cannot prove their worth should be cut or replaced. This can also be expressed in repetitive sentences and overused phrases.

Example: Below are examples of verbose sentences and their revised forms. The verbose parts of the sentence are underlined to compare to their revised forms.

1. Verbose Sentence: *The teacher demonstrated some of the various ways and methods for cutting words from my essay that I had written for class.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *The teacher demonstrated methods for cutting words from my essay.*
2. Verbose Sentence: *The essay had too many extra words in it. The language was too verbose for my professor’s liking. I need to rewrite my essay to meet her high expectations of me as a writer.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *The professor had concerns about my paper. The language was too verbose and I will need to be more concise in my writing.*
 - i. In this case, the revised sentence is completely reworded to maintain concision.

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3. Verbose Sentence: *P.J. Shipping founded in 1967 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada by Pierre James Roy has an unwavering desire to provide guests with amazing care and customer service across the Northeastern area. Recent excursions into New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire have seen positive customer reviews and burgeoning and vibrant profits. Roy has isolated Michigan as his next market and therefore we should institute a plan of action to utilize billboards and radio ads in Michigan.*
 - a. Revised sentence *P.J. Shipping desires to offer efficient shipping services to customers across Ontario and the New England states. The companies' recent expansion into the United States led to positive customer reviews and vibrant profits. Due to this, P.J. Shipping should expand into Michigan with billboards and radio advertisements.*

C. Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions are words such as “in”, “under”, and “on.” Prepositions are combined with adjectives, determinate phrases, and nouns to form prepositional phrases. 150 prepositional phrases exist in the English language. In fact, the prepositions “of”, “to”, and “in” are among the ten most frequent words in English.

Example: Below is an example of a sentence with too many prepositional phrases and its revised form.

1. Prepositional Phrases: *Bob's plan was an analysis of the impact of fast food on children.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *Bob's plan analyzes high caloric intake and saturated fat intake on children.*
2. Prepositional Phrases: *Hall's Hard Candies is really into the fitness oriented community that it is in and in doing so it offers a lot of flavors and a lot of types of candies to make.*
 - a. Revised Sentence: *Hall's Hard Candies offers an assortment of candies directed towards an active community.*

Activity 2 -- Concision- Find where the sentences are not concise (through use of “to be” verbs, unnecessary language, or prepositional phrases) and rephrase the sentence without it.

1. The Olive Garden's pasta dishes are excellent.

2. Due to the drought, the water that is used by the residents of the town is under close scrutiny

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3. Jennifer Lawrence is the star of the *Hunger Games* movies.

4. He drove in an erratic way when he went to see his sister who lives on the other side of the state.

IV. Transitions

Transitions are words or phrases that link sentences to their following sentence and paragraphs to their following paragraphs. Transitions create relationships in the paper. Transitions create an intelligible flow and direct the reader through the paper.

- Avoid transitional phrases that contain no particular information. Instead of using frivolous transitional phrases, explain the meaning and relate the information.

Example: Below are examples of inappropriate and appropriate transitions used in sentences. They are marked with underlines.

1. Nonexistent Transition: Advertisements for sugary foods that use cartoons are better than commercials that just show the food.
 - a. Appropriate Transition: On the other hand, advertisements for sugary foods using cartoons to target children have proven more effective.
 2. Inappropriate Transition: Children that have access to student-run literacy programs have increased abilities and willingness to read. More simply, children do not like adults telling them to read so we should have college kids do it instead.
 - a. Appropriate Transition: According to Fowler (2004), the child's mind is complex and needs to be able to express itself on its surroundings. For this reason, Child Care facilities should be built with minimal walls and include open spaces.
- Some acceptable transitional phrases:
 - Furthermore, Secondly, In addition, Besides, Next, Moreover, On the other hand, Although, Conversely, However, Similarly, On account of, Because, Since, Consequently, So, Therefore, Thus.

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Answer Key

Activity 1 -- Cliches & Idioms - Suggested rewritten sentences

1. The Bellagio hotel's mission statement encourages employees to **think and work innovatively.**

2. Kegan was not working hard enough, so his boss asked him to **take on new projects and responsibilities within the company.**

3. Jenny is a wonderful gymnast, **and many people think she is uniquely equipped to excel in the sport.**

4. Alice felt like she had **taken on too many projects at work**, and could not focus because of it.

Activity 2 -- Concision - Suggested rewritten sentences

1. The Olive Garden **serves excellent pasta dishes.**
2. Due to the drought, the residents' water usage became scrutinized.
3. Jennifer Lawrence **stars** in the *Hunger Games* movies
4. He drove **erratically** when he went to see his sister who lives out of state.

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