



# Newsbrief

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## Technical Writer/Communicator

by Amy Hollister, Editor

Many of us have asked ourselves, "What is a technical writer/communicator and what type of job is he or she actually responsible for performing?" Recently, I read a job description that described us tech writers/communicators as such:

"An integral part of the Company interaction design team. Engineers and programmers will use your documentation as a product specification; marketing people will use it to shape their sales plans; management will use it for team building and communications."



"You will participate in design brainstorming sessions, examining products, contributing ideas, and finding solutions. You will bring together the words, sketches, ideas, and diagrams created by the entire design team, crafting a complete description of the product and its behavior. This means thinking hard about project design objectives and determining how best to communicate them to Company clients."

"You will work less like a technical writer than like an investigative reporter, distilling the design process



into a readable, effective document. You will work in close-knit teams of creative people, helping them to work effectively and complete complex projects."

"Meeting with clients and with designers to participate in the design process will be an integral part of your job."

This reiterates that we also need good verbal communication skills, in addition to the written word. We should also probably own a nice business suit or two!☺

## The Text Doctor's Diagnosis

### How Are Your Writing Manners?

from "The Text Doctor's Diagnosis" [www.textdoctor.com](http://www.textdoctor.com)

There seem to be a lot of articles complaining about the recent decline in manners. Certainly, we've all experienced drivers who run yellow lights or cut us off on the freeway. Employees wander into meetings late with no apparent guilt. Business correspondence seems vague, unclear, or repetitive, wasting our time.

Perhaps the anonymity of ATMs, faxes, the Internet, and e-mail have reduced our need to be kind, courteous, patient, and considerate. Could pressures to be efficient and businesslike also contribute to the loss of politeness?

This article will encourage you to use good manners in written communication. If you are complete, clear, concise, and correct in your

writing, you will more easily communicate your point. Let's see how this might work for you.

### Be complete

Provide context and background for your letter, memo, or e-mail. Remember that your needs are not the primary issue on your reader's mind, so remind them briefly of the history of the issue and its importance to you and to them. When responding to e-mail, include the original text or summarize the points to provide context, then respond.

### Be clear

Be kind and structure your document logically and clearly. Be sure to make your structure explicit by using headings and subheadings to allow your reader to browse and reread.



It's also kind to use bulleted or numbered lists to make your points stand out rather than bury them in a full-text paragraph.

### Be concise

Which sentence would you rather read?



### Wordy version:

Transfer the scanned item to the location in which the user would like to have it located. (17 words)

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### Tightened version:

Transfer the scanned item to the preferred location. (8 words)

The tightened sentence on the right cuts 50% of the words from the original on the left. Such tightening will cut your reader's time in half. Of course, it takes YOU time to tighten, but 30 minutes spent tightening a memo to 100 people might save each reader 3 minutes. You've probably saved the universe a net of 270 minutes.

However, in the interest of conciseness, please don't tighten out "please" and "thank you." These words make reading much more pleasant, especially for an audience required to read and act.

### Be correct

Correctness in grammar and mechanics is simple politeness. Misplaced commas may cause re-readings. If you misspell words, your reader will have to mentally correct you, slowing down their reading process. This may even anger them. Can you afford that outcome? Using manners to communicate in writing will not only save your reader time, but may actually help get your document read! 📧

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## Upcoming Conferences and Seminars

from Comtech Services, Inc.



Help is on the way!

Don't miss these conferences and seminars that are sure to address issues you are facing everyday!

Check out the website links for details on each one!

The Center for Information Development Management (CIDM) presents the following conferences in 2000.

- **Single Source 2000**  
July 31 & August 1  
Wyndham NW Hotel  
Chicago, Illinois

Sessions will focus on practical topics to help you move forward with your own single sourcing projects.

[www.singlesource2000.com](http://www.singlesource2000.com)

- **New Managers Conference**  
August 21-23  
Hyatt Regency, Denver Tech Center

Learn mistakes to avoid—from experienced managers of information-development and training—and benefit from wisdom gained in years of on-the-job experience!

[www.infomanagementcenter.com/newmanager.htm](http://www.infomanagementcenter.com/newmanager.htm)

- **Best Practices Conference**  
October 2-4  
Hilton Waterfront Beach Resort,  
Huntington Beach, California

Influence the future of information development by fostering best practices, keeping alert to new developments, and setting strategies for the future. Registration and program information will be posted at:

[www.infomanagementcenter.com](http://www.infomanagementcenter.com)

Just click on "Conference" when you get there!

### Seminars



Seminars in Usable Design presents the following workshops:

- **Developing Standards for Online and Web-based Communication**  
Denver, CO, September 14-15  
Jacksonville, FL, October 19-20

[www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01standards.htm](http://www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01standards.htm)

- **Documentation Databases: Developing a single-sourcing strategy**  
Oakland, CA, June 26-27  
Austin, TX, September 7-8

[www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01ss.htm](http://www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01ss.htm)

- **User and Task Analysis for Information Design**  
Minneapolis, MN, June 26-27  
Seattle, WA, August 7-8  
Greenville, SC, November 2-3

[www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01tasks.htm](http://www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01tasks.htm)

- **Essentials of Online Structure: Recognizing, taming and using online chaos to help people work**  
Chicago, IL, July 10-11

[www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01eos.htm](http://www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01eos.htm)

- **Downsizing your Documentation: Online and off**  
Charleston, SC, July 19-20

[www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01dyd.htm](http://www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01dyd.htm)

- **Managing your Documentation Projects**  
Minneapolis, MN,  
September 11-12



[www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01pm.htm](http://www.usabledesign.com/01seminars/01pm.htm)

For more information, please contact:  
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## Ten Reasons Why Editors Stop Reading

by Joyce Faust  
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Editors will quickly stop reading your manuscript if they see "amateur" written all over it. Remember, editors have piles of skillfully written manuscripts awaiting their perusal.

Following are ten mistakes that are likely to cause editors to put your manuscript down and pick up someone else's:

## 1. Improper Manuscript Format

Editors spurn messy or improperly formatted manuscripts. Beginners often make the same mistakes: single spacing, justified right margins, no page numbers or headings. Check writing books/articles for proper set-ups. Also, don't submit stained, creased, ragged-edged or stapled pages (use paper clips), or pages subjected to smoke. Non-smoking editors don't appreciate manuscripts reeking of smoke.

## 2. Poor Spelling/Typos

Use your spell checker and, more importantly, your dictionary. Excellent spelling is a top priority. Efforts must be made to find spelling errors and correct them. All writers make typos, but if you're an especially lousy typist, find a good one.



## 3. Minimal Use of Contractions

An instant sign of stilted writing is the lack of contractions. Don't write, "I am going," "She has not said." Characters' dialogue should read like people speak—naturally. Occasionally it's okay to say "I am," or "She has not," because people don't speak using all contractions, either. Check contraction use and your dialogue will flow more smoothly.

## 4. Wrong Tenses

Editors are usually good at catching improper tenses, but don't appreciate the writer continually losing the time thread. Ask yourself if the action is happening now, yesterday, or next year. Are your characters speaking in the past, present, or future?



## 5. Overdoing Exclamation Points

Excessive use of this punctuation mark cries beginner. Use them only where

special emphasis is needed. One is enough—three adds no more emphasis than one, and simply marks the writer as an amateur.

## 6. Excessive “-ly” Words

Editors consider “-ly” word (adverb) usage lazy writing. Anyone can write, “She said sadly” or “The dog barked loudly.” Find “ly” words and substitute better choices. Show instead of tell (see #10). Portray what's happening through creative dialogue or absorbing action, using “ly” words sparingly.

## 7. Incorrect Basic English

Writers are expected to know the difference between “there, their, they're,” “to, two, too,” “it's, its,” “your, you're.” These fundamentals were taught in grade school. Spell checkers don't catch them, so when in doubt, use your reference books.

## 8. Careless Word Usage

Two common word mix-ups are advise/advice and affect/effect. If you have problems with similarly spelled words, look them up. They may look alike, but have different meanings. Editors expect writers to use them correctly.

## 9. Ignoring Reference Books

Writers must have excellent reference books and use them. If you want your writing to be professional, you need a quality dictionary, thesaurus, and grammar reference book. Most writers have more, but these three are essential.

## 10. Telling—Not Showing

A major turnoff is when a writer tells the story instead of showing how it unfolds. Amateur writers submit pages of mind-numbing explanation of what is happening; competent writers show what's transpiring through realistic dialogue and creative character action.

Avoiding these mistakes won't guarantee that your manuscript will sell—you still need a good idea and a solid presentation. But, they will reduce your chances of being “passed over” automatically, in favor of a writer who knows the basics. 🐾

*Joyce Faust has been published in several magazines, newspapers, and online. She has 25+ years experience as a typesetter, proofreader, and minor editor, and is currently working on magazine and online projects. Joyce does freelance proofreading, minor editing, and manuscript typing from her home office.*

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## What's New in Your World?

by Amy Hollister  
Editor

**Dr. Mary Battle** recently returned from London, where she attended Forum 2000. This “idea” conference is held every 5 years. Dr. Battle has graciously agreed to be our October speaker, where she will give us her personal account of the conference. 🐾

**Writer's Block**  
from Edmond H. Weiss,  
*Writing Remedies:  
Practical Exercises  
for Technical Writing*  
(Oyrx Press, 1990)



**M**arathon sentences are described as those containing 26 words or more. Although some good writers can craft clear, readable sentences with 50 or 100 words, most average writers should stay below 20 words. In manuals, procedures, or instructions, the ideal average is 13 to 17 words. Marathon sentences result from two mistakes: using too many words to express simple ideas, and putting too much information in one sentence.



## Wordy

### No:

The general feeling of the meeting was that within the framework of the tests a great deal has been accomplished and learned by all parties, and the prototype system has achieved most of the objectives with regard to showing the functional capabilities of SHIP under an INFO/TSO environment.

### Yes:

At the meeting everyone agreed that the tests were successful, having proved that SHIP works efficiently under INFO/TSO.

## Crowded



### No:

In addition to solid, dashed, phantom, centerline, and invisible line fonts, numerous linestring fonts are available that provide generation about a centerline with variable spacing (width), layer of insertion options, and left, right, and center justifications.

### Yes:

The available line fonts are solid, dashed, phantom, centerline, and invisible. There are also linestring fonts that generate about a centerline. These linestring fonts can vary spacing (width), insert layers of information, and justify text to the right, left, or center.☺

☺*Editor's note: If you have not already done so, please subscribe yourself to the new Mid-South Chapter eGroup list, which can be accessed at:*



<http://www.egroups.com/subscribe/STCmidsouthChapter>



society for technical communication

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Newsbrief

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*The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.☺*