

Ten Quick Ways to Improve Your Writing

(or Ten of the Most Common Writing Sins and How to Fix Them!)

The following tips apply to any written materials including user documentation, training materials, correspondence, PowerPoint presentations, Web pages, policies and procedures, and so forth.

1. **Avoid** (like the plague) writing headings and sentences in **uppercase!!!**
STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT READING ALL UPPERCASE TEXT (LIKE THIS) IS DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND AND HARD ON THE EYES. When you want to emphasize something (an occasional word or phrase), use **bold**. (The only legitimate exception for using uppercase for occasional emphasis within a sentence or phrase is in e-mail messages, where bolding may not work.)
2. **Avoid** (also, like the plague) excessive use of **capitalization!!!**
Again studies have shown that making readers **Shift Their Eyes Up And Down With Every Word (Like This) Is Very Hard On The Eyes.** Use capitalization for things like the titles of documents (SMS DataExpress Training Guide). Rather than always capitalizing headings and subheadings, you can make them stand out by increasing the font size, by bolding, or a combination of increased font size and bolding.
3. Watch out for using **too many fonts**.
Most guidelines recommend no more than **six font** changes within a document. Don't confuse font with typeface. You are changing the font whenever you change the typeface (for example, from Arial to Times Roman), **or** the point size, **or** when you add bolding or italics. Six fonts get used up quickly!
Text with lots of font changes, like this, is really Hard for people to read and decipher.
4. **Avoid full justification.** Many studies cite justification as a no-no because a reader's eyes have to jump over unpredictably sized spaces between words in some lines of text, like the lines of text in this paragraph. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog and escapes with his life. Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog and escapes with his life.
The result is that justified text is harder to read than ragged edge (unjustified) text. Justified text looks great from a distance (neat and boxy), but up close and personal, it's hard on the eyes.
5. Write in **complete sentences**. At minimum a complete sentence has:
 - a subject (usually a noun, noun phrase, or pronoun, in other words, a person, place, or thing), and
 - a verb (action words or a form of the verb **to be**).If you can't find the subject, you might not have a complete sentence. If you can't find the verb, you do not have a complete sentence.

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6. Watch out for something called **agreement**. Pronouns (for example, **it** and **they**) **must** agree in number (singular or plural) with the nouns to which they refer. So if the noun is singular, the pronoun must be singular.

Example 1:

- Incorrect: When **the user** (singular) wants to schedule the payroll, **they** (plural) must ...
- Correct: When **the user** (singular) wants to schedule the payroll, **he/she** (singular) must ...

To avoid the he/she issue, switch to plurals. For example, When **users** want to schedule the payroll, **they** must yatty, yatty, yatty.

Example 2:

- Incorrect: When **a college** (singular) implements ..., **they** (plural) must first ...
- Correct: When **a college** (singular) implements ..., **it** (singular) must first ...
- OR-
- When **colleges** (plural) implement ..., **they** (plural) must first ...

7. Use **consistent wording**, that is, use similar word patterns for similar actions (referred to as parallel structure). Readers have to shift gear when new wording patterns are introduced.

- Not parallel: At the Go to Lunch prompt, type ...
At the prompt for Fun, type ...
- Parallel: At the Go to Lunch prompt, type ...
At the Fun prompt, type ...

8. Use **active voice**; avoid using the passive voice. Using passive voice makes it difficult for the reader to determine who is doing what. It also takes more words to write in the passive voice.

How do you know if you are using passive voice? Passive forms of a verb consist of some part of the auxiliary verb **to be** plus the **past participle** of the main verb.

Examples:

Change these passive phrases	To these active phrases
...to be added...	Add the ... After you add ...
...must be completed...	Complete the ...
...is entered...	Enter the ...
...are/can be/is identified by...	Identify the ... by ... To identify the ...
...are maintained...	Maintain the ...
...are posted...	Post the ...
...can be printed...	Print the ...
...is saved...	Save the ...
...is scheduled...	Schedule the ...
...are/can be/is/may be used to...	Use the ... to ... When you use the ...

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9. When writing step-by-step instructions, use **feedback statements** to provide additional information about a step. A feedback statement is **not** an instruction (don't use imperative verbs in feedback).

10. Don't assume that the reader or user knows what you are talking about!!!
Always include enough information, ideally, so that new employees will be able to understand what you are talking about (or at least know where to find it)!!!