

Writing for Professional Society Newsletters

Earl F. Burkholder, PS, PE
Department of Surveying Engineering
New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM
© June 2001

Disclaimer:

First, I am not an authority on writing and do not consider myself a good writer - yet. But, if reading this article provides a spark of inspiration or helps in any way, then I have achieved my objective. Second, if you take exception to any point or suggestion offered herein, I will not be offended. Your feedback could help us both improve our writing.

Introduction:

Articles in many newsletters are used to convey valuable information to members of the profession. By default, we also project a professional image by those writings. Each reader's perception of the profession can be influenced by what is read. If read only by our peers, our collective self image may be the only casualty of badly written material. However, we have no assurance that our writings are read only by sympathetic or undiscriminating peers. Therefore, we should strive to make our technical and professional writings as clear and as concise as possible.

Purpose:

I'm writing this article to share ideas that might help improve the image we project to ourselves and to society. Service to society and success in our profession are both enhanced by our ability to communicate ideas effectively. The following suggestions are neither perfect nor absolute but are offered in the spirit of mutual assistance and self improvement.

Suggestions:

1. Writing can be done in first, second or third person. First person is appropriate for describing personal experience, second person refers to the actions of others, and third person is impersonal. An author should strive for consistency (with respect to person) throughout an article. First person is appropriate for newsletters and magazines while writing in third person is more compatible with the formality of technical and scientific journals. Exceptions abound.
2. A sentence is the basic unit of logical development. It expresses a complete thought and minimally should include:
 - A. A capital letter at the beginning and a period at the end.

- B. A subject and verb which are consistent. For example, a legislative bill may be written, introduced, discussed, passed, or killed, but a bill doesn't undertake steps, have feelings, or drive a car. People do those things.
 - C. Qualifying and explanatory phrases as required to preserve fact and add clarification. i.e. John drove the car (in the park yesterday).
 - D. Logical placement of phrases. For example:
 - 1. Ambiguous: I saw two dogs fighting in my chair.
 - 2. Better: While sitting in my chair, I saw two dogs fighting.
 - 3. Best?: While sitting in my chair, I saw two dogs fighting on the lawn.
 - E. Correct punctuation (period, comma, question mark, hyphen, etc).
3. A pronoun is a word used in place of a noun. Whenever a pronoun is used, it should be immediately obvious to the reader what word or object is being referenced. A specific pairing should occur in the reader's mind without needing to re-read the sentence. A possible exception is use of the word "it" as in the previous sentence. But, that too can be confusing if one is careless as in, "When I asked him about it, he said it was too late."

An example I encountered recently is, "Even though the Egyptian system appeared extraordinarily complicated they were probably the first surveyors." The problem is the word "Egyptian" is used as an adjective to the noun "system" but it was also subsequently used as a precedent for the pronoun "they."

4. Generally, active voice should be used instead of passive voice. For example:
- A. (Passive) A reader's attention is held by using concise words.
 - B. (Active) Concise wording will hold a reader's attention.
5. Efficient use of words is also very important. In speaking we use "uh" as a filler. In writing, fillers include A, AN, THE, THAT, I, and others. When writing for Russell Brinker, Co-Editor of The Surveying Handbook, he insisted that every word which did not add to the meaning of a sentence should be eliminated. Mr. Brinker might edit the previous sentence to read, "... he insisted all unnecessary words be eliminated." Professional editing can shorten many articles without losing significant material.
6. The subject should agree with the verb. A favorite class room quiz is to ask, "Which is correct? Two and three is six or two and three are six." The attentive student will object to the ambiguity of the question. Two correct statements are: 1) the sum of two and three is five and 2) the product of two and three is six. Our writings should avoid ambiguity and include all essential information.

In the first sentence of item 5 above, a singular subject (use) is followed by a prepositional phrase having a plural object (words). The temptation then is to choose a plural verb to go with a plural object immediately preceding it. When proof reading, I find it good practice to identify the subject of each sentence and make sure a compatible verb is used. On the other hand, blind application of the rules doesn't always seem to work either. Consider the following examples of talking about units of currency/measurement. In each case a singular subject is a plural noun:

- A. Fifteen dollars is the price of the pen.
 - B. Twelve feet is the distance to the corner.
7. The apostrophe is used when combining two words to show where letters have been omitted. Separately, the apostrophe is used to show ownership or possession. When using the apostrophe to show possession we need to be clear whether the possessor is singular or plural. It makes a difference whether the apostrophe is placed before or following the "s." Is the following sentence correct? The sky's color is blue.
 8. Gender and ethnic sensitivity are also an important part of our writing. We need to develop the habit of using neutral generic words like "chairperson" instead of chairman, "crew member" instead of "rodman," and "flagger" instead of "flagman." We should also agree that, even though humor is desirable, no chuckle is legitimate in professional society writings if it comes at the expense of another's cultural or ethnic values.
 9. In formal reports and technical literature it is imperative to list references and to quote one's source. Less stringent criteria are applied to informal writings but, in my opinion, the basic principle of giving credit where credit is due still applies. For example, in item 5 above, I was happy to acknowledge the help I received from Russell Brinker. As a practical matter though, it is impossible to quote a reference for every single statement, even in formal technical writing where complete documentation is critical.
 10. It is acceptable, but not necessary, to list references for newsletter type articles. However, as writing formality increases, so does the need for very specific, accurate, correct, reliable references. The problem to be avoided (even with informal writings) is that of making unsubstantiated statements and/or relying on conjecture to prove a point. Opinions can certainly be stated as opinions and we can agree to disagree on interpretation of many circumstances, but building a line of reasoning on questionable evidence is foolish.
 11. For practice, edit this article using the points listed. Was first person used or not used consistently? Could phrases be reordered to improve clarity? Is the precedent of each pronoun obvious? Could the active voice be used to improve any suggestion? What words could be omitted without losing meaning? Does the subject always agree with the verb? Has the apostrophe been used correctly? Has proper credit been given where due? Have any copyrights been violated?

Copyright Notice:

What does the copyright notice under the title mean? Your attorney can tell you specifically, but my understanding of the intent is that a copyright exists to protect the creative work of the copyright holder against unlawful copying or use. I feel we have been ethically careless in the past and many have willfully photocopied material in violation of legitimate copyrights. We need to be more specific about securing permission to copy material and can learn from the experience of Texaco. In August, 1992, Texaco lost a copyright suit because the judge did not agree with Texaco's interpretation of "fair use."

Written permission to copy or reprint this article can be obtained from the author.