E 303: TECHNICAL WRITING
School of Literature and Languages
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Interoffice Memo

To: Mr. Merchant's English 303 students
From: Mr. David M. Merchant, English Instructor
Subject: Lecture 12: More on grammar, punctuation, and spelling
Date: April 15, 2020

The purpose of this memo is to discuss some common correctness errors from the last assignment.

Summary

Correctness (grammar and spelling) is one of the Markel's Eight Measures of Excellence for technical writing. Recall that most readers of technical documents are skimming and scanning; they need to quickly find and understand the information they ***need*** to make a decision or to do something. They may be busy, stressed, tired, or non-native speakers. Correctly written documents are easy and efficient, both in reading and in translating. They are safer as well: miscommunication can damage an organization (reputation, bottom line, customer base, etc.).

Common Errors

The following are the top common correctness errors found in the last assignment.

Which Versus That
Check for "which" and "that": are they being used correctly and punctuated correctly? For a good lesson on this, see < www.grammarly.com/blog/comma-before-which/ > and Section 1.4 and Section 1.10.10 in *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers*.

Hyphens
Hyphens are maddening and somewhat controversial in how they are used. Technical writing tends to prefer hyphenation more than other forms of writing. Remember that readers are skimming, busy, or non-native speakers: hyphens help with clarity by making sure the reader sees two words that are working as one unit are read as one unit.

For example: "high end solar panel" means a solar panel with one end that is elevated up while a "high-end solar panel" means a panel of high quality.

Which of the following work shifts would you rather work?

1. Twenty four-hour shifts (20 shifts that are each four hours long)
2. Twenty-four hour shifts (24 shifts that are each an hour long)
3. Twenty-four-hour shifts (unknown number of shifts that each last 24-hours long)
4. Twenty four hour shifts (unclear: 20 four-hour shifts or 24-hour shifts, or 24-hour shifts?)

However, note that a hyphen is not used after an adverb ending in –ly in a phrasal adjective ("the rapidly accelerating rocket"). Also, combined adjective (phrasal adjective) comes at the end of a sentence instead of before the noun it modifies, then you do not need to hyphenate:

> *Incorrect*: The planetary probe performs high precision experiments.

> *Correct*: The planetary probe performs high-precision experiments.
> *Correct*: The planetary probe's experiments are high precision.

See Section 5.3 in *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* (you probably should read, or reread, that entire section since the proper use of hyphens and dashes can be confusing).

Commas and Compound Predicates

The following is from Section 5.1.5 in *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers*.

A predicate is the part of a sentence that consists of a verb and any of its complements. The predicate tells the reader what the subject is doing or what is being done to the subject. A compound predicate is when one subject has two or more predicates where the subject is not repeated.

> *Incorrect*: I meant to buy tickets for the magic show, but ran out of time.
> *Correct*: I meant to buy tickets for the magic show but ran out of time.

When the subject is repeated, then the sentence becomes a compound sentence which does use a comma:

> *Incorrect*: I meant to buy tickets for the magic show but I ran out of time.
> *Correct*: I meant to buy tickets for the magic show, but I ran out of time.

Sometimes, however, a comma is needed in a compound predicate to help with clarity:

> The engineer saw her colleague had entered the lab and turned on the test equipment.
> The engineer saw her colleague had entered the lab, and turned on the test equipment.

This subject is "engineer" and the compound predicate is "saw…and turned"; however, because the first object also has a verb phrase "had entered," the reader can become confused and think that the compound predicate is "had entered ... and turned on" when the compound predicate is actually "saw … and turned on." Without the comma, the sentence can easily be misread as the colleague is the one that turned on the test equipment. With the comma, the engineer is the one who turned on the test equipment. Though you probably should rewrite the sentence to make it even clearer (remember, your readers can be skimming or scanning).

> The engineer waited to turn on the test equipment until she saw her colleague enter the lab.

Apostrophes

A store had a sign that said "were open." That, of course, means that they were open, but are not open now. What they mean to write is "we're open." Computer programmers know that punctuation is important: a computer program can crash or give weird results if a comma is used in a line of code instead of a semicolon, for example. This is true for any language that has punctuation: meanings change if you misuse punctuation.

Poor writing is difficult and expensive to translate. You need to write technical documents so that in a pinch, in an emergency, they need to be machine-translated, the results will have a higher chance of being intelligible.

Apostrophes are used in contractions but do not use contractions in technical writing (unless they are in a quotation or you are discussing contractions). Possessive nouns always use an apostrophe. Pronouns, with one exception, never use an apostrophe. For example, "it's is not the possessive of "it," rather "its" is the possessive form; likewise, "hers" is the possessive of "her." The exception is the possessive of "one": "one's judgment." Plurals, with one exception, never use an apostrophe. The exception is plurals of single letters: "mind your p's and q's. However, if capital letters are used, then the plurals usually do not use apostrophes: "mind our Ps and Qs."

Fewer Versus Less

If something can be counted, use "fewer":

- Fewer bottles
- Fewer cars
- Fewer classes
- Fewer crawfish
- Fewer spacecraft launches
- Fewer people
- Fewer watches
- Fewer zombies

If something cannot be counted, use "less":

- Air
- Disease
- Heavy
- Pain
- Pollution
- Sorrow
- Time
- Water

Spelling

Misspellings can, at best, make the reader laugh ("asses" instead of "assess") or stumble for a moment, and at worse change the meaning of the sentence or make it difficult to be quickly translated or understood by a non-native speaker. The following are some common spelling errors from the last assignment.

- "Aircraft" is correct, "aircrafts" is not (the plural of aircraft is aircraft)
- "Affect" (usually a verb) versus "Effect" (usually a noun)
- "Everyday" versus "Every day"
- "Law suits" versus "lawsuits" (law suits: coat and pants for a lawyer?)
- "Lead" (as a verb, is present tense) versus "led" (past tense of the verb lead).
- "Preformed" versus "performed"
- "Spacecraft" is correct, "space craft" is not

Others are words that are compound when in adjectival or noun form and two words when in verb form.

- "Backup" (adjective/noun) and "back up" (verb)
- "Bailout" (adjective/noun) and "bail out" (verb)
- "Letdown" (adjective/noun) and "let down" (verb)
- "Makeup" (adjective/noun) and "make up" (verb)
- "Pullout" (adjective/noun) and "pull out" (verb)
- "Rollback" (adjective/noun) and "roll back" (verb)
- "Setup" (adjective/noun) and "set up" (verb)
- "Wakeup" (adjective/noun) and "wake up" (verb)
- "Workout" (adjective/noun) and "work out" (verb)

Comas

I strongly advise reading Section 5.1 in *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* as commas are the most commonly used punctuation and, thus, the most abused punctuation. Technical writing tends to use commas more: the serial comma and introductory commas even for short introductions. Again, if you keep in mind that your readers will be skimming, scanning, busy, tired, or non-native speakers, commas help slow the reader down and help them read your writing correctly.

Lastly

Use "first," "second," … and "last" instead of "firstly," "secondly," …and "lastly." "Finally" is OK to use.

Closing

If you have questions, please contact me via email or the course Moodle page (forum or messaging service). Do not forget to do your assigned readings. Again, *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* is located at davidmmerchant.com/.