

Examples of Good and Bad Technical Writing

Effective technical writing demands that what is written be direct, accurate, clear, simple, without ambiguity, and without excess words. All information that is needed to make a report complete must be included, and unnecessary information should be avoided.



Although an unlikely place to find examples of good and bad technical writing, the lavatories of commercial airlines offer excellent examples of how a simple message should and should not be written. Evidently, passengers are prone to discard a variety of articles in the toilets that the system is not set up to handle. Consequently, most airlines post signs asking passengers not to do this.

A message in the lavatory of one airline states "Please do not put objects such as air sickness bags, diapers, or towels in toilet." This sign requests public cooperation in a way that is simple, direct, clear, concise, and in no way offensive or funny. It needs no modification or improvement.

Two separate signs are found in the lavatory of another airline. One says, "Discarding anything other than toilet tissue in the toilet can cause external leaks and create a safety hazard," and the other says, "Please use the trash container for anything other than toilet tissue." In this situation, the inaccurate message is stressed and repeated that toilet tissue is the *only* thing that should go in the stool.

In two other airplanes, the signs read, "Please do not deposit any article in toilet" and "Do not put any article in toilet." These messages are clear, concise, direct, and not ambiguous. But they are inaccurate, because they state that the facility should not be used.

In another airline, the sign says, "Please do not throw towels, cups, sanitary napkins, bottles, razor blades, objects in toilet." The message becomes redundant with the word "object," because all the items listed are already "objects." As in the previous example, "throw" is inaccurate, because it implies that depositing the listed items would be all right as long as they were placed gently.

Another airline has eliminated ambiguity by saying "Do not throw paper towels, sanitary napkins, diapers, cups, bottles, other items in toilet." The inaccurate suggestion remains, however, that gentle deposition is acceptable.

Another airline had the message, "Please do not throw foreign objects in flushing toilet." This message contains several examples of inaccuracy. Again, can items be placed gently, as long as they are not thrown? Foreign objects are excluded, but are domestic articles all right? Are foreign articles o.k. as long as they are put in gently? And is it only during flushing that deposition is forbidden? In this case, "flushing" is ambiguous and superfluous. No doubt it was intended to identify the type of facility. As such, it is superfluous, because no non-flushing facilities were present. It is ambiguous, because it can identify either the type of facility or its action, and could be construed to mean that foreign articles can be thrown at any time, except when the toilet is flushing.

A few years ago, I found the sign "Please do not put hard or sharp articles or objects such as air sickness bags or diapers in toilet." This message is completely accurate. It is somewhat repetitive and not concise. Evidently the airline agreed, because their message now states "Please do not put objects such as airsick bags, cloth diapers or cloth towels in toilet."

Remember:

Our writing should be accurate,
Clear, simple, and direct.
Statements that are ambiguous
Are ones we should reject.

Jean H. Dawson, Weed Scientist, Prosser, WA 99350