

Technical Writing Compared With Other Writing



We speak of technical writing as if it were separate and different from other kinds of writing. Is it really different? With respect to basic structure, the spelling and grammar of technical writing are identical to those of other writing. Major differences are found in purpose and style.

Technical writing is strictly utilitarian. Its purpose is to convey information, not to amuse, entertain, or arouse strong feelings. Therefore, it appeals to readers' reason, not to their emotion.

The style of technical writing should be simple, direct, concise, clear, objective, restrained, and meticulously accurate. A reader begins to read a technical article because he is already interested in the subject. Therefore, a flashy style to arouse interest is not needed. A clear, concise presentation of the subject should then maintain the reader's interest.

As the vehicle for presenting information, technical writing is the unobtrusive servant of the subject being presented. It is unobtrusive because it does not attract attention to itself. In fact, the more effective technical writing is, the less it is noticed, because technical writing is intended to express, not to impress.

Attention paid to technical writing is like that paid to the temperature of a room. When a person enters a room that is comfortable, he usually doesn't give the temperature a thought. But if the room is too hot or too cold, the temperature becomes very much noticed.

Thus it is with technical writing. If an article is well written, the reader simply doesn't notice the writing style, because the clearly presented subject matter fills his attention. But if the article is hard to read, and not reader-friendly, the reader's attention may be diverted from the subject and focused on the defects of the writing itself.

Sometimes technical writing is intended to convince someone to do something. The writer of an application for a research grant tries to convince the grantor to fund the proposed work. Sound, logical information must be the means of moving the reader to action. Therefore, the style of such writing remains the same as that for any other technical writing—strictly utilitarian. Even though intended to move the reader to action, the writing still addresses his reason, not his emotion.

Remember:

The purpose of technical writing
Is strictly to inform;
Addressing the reader's reason
Must always be the norm.

J. H. Dawson, U.S. Dep. Agric., ARS, Prosser, WA 99350