Professional Writing Style
Greg Donohoe – 21 October 2008

Professional communication should be direct and simple, as if you were explaining the work to a colleague. Say what you mean, mean what you say, and be concise.

Guiding principle: “Don’t make me think!”

A technical report must be persuasive as well as informative
• Persuade the reader that the work is important and worth continued support

Effective communication flows easily
• Tell a little story – A leads to B, and to C, and inevitably to D (our solution)
• Make it easy on the reader: eliminate clutter.

Cluttered: “Of the kinds of fasteners that we could have used, instead of screws or nails, we chose tacks made of brass to hold the lid on because they don’t rust.”

Cleaner: “The lid is fastened with rust-proof brass tacks.”

Get to the point right away – don’t build up to it with a lot of background, or you’ll lose your reader.

Avoid repetition (redundancy). It interrupts the flow. Well-structure writing doesn’t need it.

State the facts – don’t embellish or use hyperbole (intentional exaggeration)

Exaggeration: “We had to wait forever for the results.”
Fact: “We received the results in three weeks.”

Hyperbole: “The results of the experiment were incredible.”
What does incredible mean? It’s the opposite of credible!

Fact: “The results of the experiment exceeded expectations. We expected to generate 7 volts, but in fact measured 10.3 to 11.5 volts.”

Use neutral, non-judgmental language. In the example above, I was going to label examples “Bad”, “Better”, “Bad”, and “Good”, but decided to label them “Exaggeration”, “Fact”, “Hyperbole”, and “Fact”. Why is judgmental language not advised?
1. It’s ambiguous. Not everyone agrees on what “good” and “bad” mean. Everybody knows the difference between 7 volts and 10.3 volts.
2. Judgmental language can be inflammatory, provoking hostility or defiance in the reader.

Avoid brand names when you are referring to something more general.
Not: “The fat end of the chord is plugged into Avista.”
But: “The fat end of the chord is plugged into a source of 110V AC line voltage.”
Sequence

Don’t refer to something before you have defined it or described it.

**Acronyms:** define them on first use e.g. Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA). Afterwards, you can just say FPGA.

Use good grammar. It makes your writing so much clearer.


Documenting Projects

Teamwork: agree on terminology, and everybody stick to it

- Names of things
- Modules, signals, variables