

## Bringing Sense and Sensibility to Technical Writing

by [Louis Yong](#), on 29 October 2009.

Communication is pretty much ingrained in our lives. We communicate with each other to exchange or impart ideas, thoughts, opinions, and instructions in the form of speech, writing, and images. Today, information can be within our grasp in a matter of seconds, thanks to the Internet and the progress of technology that brings the Internet ever closer into our lives. Studies have shown Internet users spend less than one minute on an



Photo by [Coal Miki](#)

average website<sup>1</sup>, a behavior that may be an indication of society's current expectation of how information should be presented. This "instant gratification" consumption of information poses a challenge for effective communication. Conciseness and clarity of the information is only part of effective communication; the audience composition and the manner information is presented to them also play a role to avoid confusion, misunderstanding, and general lack of interest.

The term "technical writing" implies writing documentation littered with technical jargons; a scattering of ambiguous abbreviations; a hodgepodge of diagrams, figures, and tables. This couldn't be further from the truth because technical writing, when done properly, presents the information in a clear and concise format so that the readers can understand and put the information into practice. Furthermore, technical writing covers a wide range of fields, not only technical documentation, such as consumer products, computer hardware and software, and education materials.

You may think that a simple product would not need the skills of a technical writer, but things aren't that simple in reality. Take for example, a seat hook. This is a consumer product with one end that attaches to a headrest pole in vehicles, with a hook on the other end for hanging bags and other items. Sounds like a simple product, doesn't it?

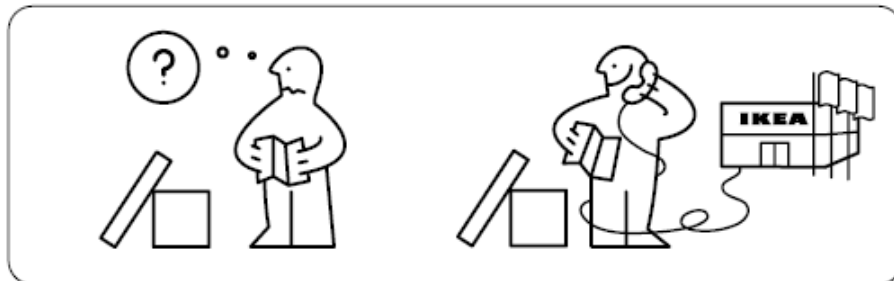
I've reproduced the instructions printed on the product packaging, verbatim:

#### INSTRUCTIONS

- Suitable for all types of car with the removable heat rest. (Good only for 12mm diameter mainstay)
- As it is can be turned around place it beside the head rest when not it use so that it won't be nuisance.
- It can't be used on car seat with high back rest of non-recoverable head rest.
- For sately, do not hand with breakable objects.
- As it is a simple mainstay, it can't bear heavy objects.
- This article is to prevent the carrying goods from overturning or falling off and not for protection of carrying goods.

Are you still with me? Got a little hot and bothered by the spelling mistakes and the blatant abuse of grammar in the example I just provided? You're what some people call Sticklers. Sticklers like us get pretty riled up when we see sentences like these. So take a deep breath, count to ten, and settle down. Remind yourself: sometimes people don't know better, so don't blame them. However, if you're cool as a cucumber and unbothered by the atrocities I've just presented, count yourselves lucky.

As you can see, even the simplest of products can be made complicated with poorly written instructions. Communication does not necessarily have to be in the written form. Take Ikea<sup>2</sup> as an example: instruction manuals from Ikea contain hardly any written instructions; instead, images are used to communicate with the reader. After all, aren't pictures drawn by cave dwellers the earliest form of visual communication? Not only is Ikea drawing inspiration that within all of us, we are able to decipher images into meaning, the company also takes advantage of the cost savings of not having to localize (translate the material to different languages) the instruction manuals. It's a win-win situation: as a customer, whose extent of using a screwdriver is to open biscuit tin covers, I find myself pleasantly proud at being able to assemble a TV cabinet all on my own; while the management at Ikea can pat themselves on their back on a job well done in saving money for the company, and continue to hire designers to produce oddly named but aesthetically pleasing furniture.



Technical writing is about producing correct, clear, and concise documentation so that readers are able to understand the material and put the information into action. On one end, we've seen how a simple product can be made complicated with poorly written instructions, and on the other end, we've seen how instructions can be made so concise that no words are even necessary to convey the information.

So, is a technical writer an all-round expert? I'd like to think so, but in reality, the technical writer has to refer to the subject-matter expert for all the necessary information to be included in the documentation. The subject-matter expert is a person who knows the subject intimately and wants to share that knowledge to others. Now, it is the technical writers' turn to take that information and do what's necessary to produce the final technical documentation that conforms to the five Cs<sup>3</sup>: the documentation should be clear, correct, concise, comprehensible, and consistent.

I bet you're imagining a bunch of technical writers huddled together in a small, dark, dank room, surrounded by piles and piles of musty paper; hunched over their desks; spending hours after hours poring over every word, every sentence, and every punctuation. Well, banish that image from your mind because technical writers are a creative group of people: we are artists, writers, editors, and designers. We're teeming with creative ideas, blessed with inquisitive minds, and (I'm sure I'm not only speaking for myself) a love of reading. Our minds are bursting with interesting information, so if you're ever bored at a party, just chat us up, and we'll tell you things like these:

### **Principal and principle**

Have you ever been confused about the words *principal* and *principle*? Well, believe it or not, *the principal is your pal*, and not someone who walks around with a cane. The first word is normally associated with rank and status, while the other word means a fundamental rule, or truth.

### **Stationary and stationery**

How do you tell the difference between an object that doesn't move, and writing materials?

*The tank remained [stationary/stationery].*

Just remember that you'll need paper to write on, and *paper* has an **er**. Gosh, and so does *stationery*. So the correct choice is, *The tank remained stationary*.

### **Immigrant and emigrant**

One's coming in, another's going out. So just remember: an *immigrant* comes **in** to the country, while an *emigrant* would **exit** the country.

## Stalactite and Stalagmite

Ok, ok. So it's not really related to grammar, but it's still interesting. You see lots of these in caves, rising from the ground and hanging from the ceiling, created over time from mineral deposits. How do you tell them apart? If you're trying to impress your girl, make sure you remember this:

A *stalactite* has to hang on **tight** to the ceiling, while a *stalagmite* is a formation that **might** reach the ceiling.

Now, go forth and impress.

## Who and whom

When do you use *who* and *whom*? *He is an author [who/whom] I admire.*

Ask yourself, who do you admire? *I admire him.* Notice that *whom* also ends with an *m*, so the correct answer is: *He is an author whom I admire.*

## Which and that

These two words seem interchangeable, but wait, there's a bit of subtlety involved<sup>4</sup>.

*Vegetarians eat food [that/which] is not animal-based.*

How do you decide between the two? Try omitting the clause (a group of words with its own subject and verb) that contains *which* and *that*; if the sentence loses its meaning, use *that*. In the example, when I omit the *which/that* clause, I get the sentence: *Vegetarians eat food.* Now the sentence loses its meaning. Then the correct choice would be:

*Vegetarians eat food that is not animal-based.*

The English language is a smorgasbord of rules and meanings, so it is the technical writers who rein in the excesses and present the information in a clear, correct, concise, comprehensible, and consistent manner.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention\\_span#Historical\\_differences](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention_span#Historical_differences)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ikea.com/ms/en\\_US/customer\\_service/assembly\\_instructions.html](http://www.ikea.com/ms/en_US/customer_service/assembly_instructions.html)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technical\\_writing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technical_writing)

<sup>4</sup> *Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th Edition 2003; University of Chicago Press: 5.202