

# Creating Documentation for an International Audience

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It is difficult to write clearly and concisely in one's native tongue for others who share the language. It is even more difficult to communicate with an international audience in which readers may know English as a second language, or even as the least-spoken of several languages. Whether we are writing books, magazine articles, or user documentation, it is imperative we do so with the utmost concern for comprehension among non-native speakers of English if the publication will cross borders.

A primary concern in writing for an international audience is creating a work that provides all the necessary information without over-simplifying. This article describes several actions that help writers create documentation that is useful to an international audience. Two categories are described: grammar, punctuation, and visuals; and words and language.

## Grammar, punctuation, and visuals

### Limit the vocabulary

For works to be read by an international audience, adopt a limited vocabulary with just enough words for the work. Not only will this keep the text simple enough for readers, it will also help any non-native speakers who are involved in writing, for example, people outside the United States who are assigned to write documentation.

### Limit the length of sentences, retain words, and provide full punctuation

Simple sentences are typically easier to understand than complex and compound-complex ones. In parallel constructions, provide repetition, for example: "We hoped *that* he would go and *that* she would stay," and "You are required *to* do this and *to* do that." Use the serial comma; commas help to differentiate and specify.

### Use active voice and present tense

Active voice is usually preferable to passive voice, and the present tense is preferred. Using the active voice and the present tense make reading—and writing—easier.

### Avoid jargon and keep expressions simple

In writing for a general audience, unless it is certain that all readers will understand, avoid terminology specific to a field and find different words with the same meaning. We often refer to times, places, and relationships in terms more complicated than necessary. Find simpler words. For example, instead of *in the early part of the month of July*, simply write *in early July*.

### Choose graphics rather than text

Native and non-native speakers of English alike prefer images to long strings of words. Use bulleted, lettered, or numbered lists where they enhance comprehension, and use other visuals such as tables and figures if appropriate.

## Words and language

### Use easily defined words and primary definitions

Avoid words that have more than a single meaning, or that depend on the context for meaning. For example, the word “bear” has twenty-one definitions as a transitive and intransitive verb in the *Riverside Webster’s II New College Dictionary*. If it is absolutely necessary to use words with multiple meanings, use the first or second definition. Using one of the first few definitions helps those who must look up the word. If possible, find a different word that has fewer meanings. A glossary, footnote, or an appendix may be used to define complicated words as well as technical terms.

### Choose verbs carefully, and avoid using nouns as verbs and verbs as nouns

Try to use simple, single-word verbs whenever possible, and replace multiword verbs or longer expressions. Avoid the trend in business writing to use nouns as verbs and verbs as nouns. For example, avoid using the word “transition” to mean *shift* or *convert*, as in “You will *transition* into your new position.”

### Use words that are easy to pronounce

Avoid letters and words that may be difficult for some readers to vocalize. Readers may find it helpful to verbalize while they read, and difficult words slow the reading process, especially for non-native speakers.

### Avoid made-up words, slang, clichés, allusions, and figurative language

Words are sometimes invented to solve an immediate problem of communication. Such words may include made-up words (*neologisms*) as in *officialize* (to make official) and words used ungrammatically (*barbarism*) as in *flustrated* (flustered and frustrated), which have crept into our standard lexicon over time, but may not be understood by others. In addition, avoid clichés, allusions, figurative language, and slang (*gross*, *wimp*, *dork*), especially in writing for international audiences.

### Use traditional grammar and recognized words and phrases

As a general rule, avoid contractions in all formal writing. Pay particular attention to placement of prepositions and modifiers. For example, instead of writing “Students are *only* allowed to leave when the bell rings,” write “Students are allowed to leave *only* when the bell rings” or even “Students must remain until the bell rings.” Even different parts of the United States have different words and phrases indigenous to the regions. Consequently, avoid using any such colloquialisms as *hosepipe* for a *garden hose* and *neutral ground* for *median* (indigenous to New Orleans).

### Avoid humor and over-familiarity

Facetiousness and sarcasm are inappropriate in a formal document, and may not be understood by an international audience. Also, avoid referring to people exclusively by their first names.

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