



Enhancing readability

by Bob Johnson (wordfixer@yahoo.com)

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"We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."—Toni Morrison, Nobel Acceptance Speech (1994)

Here begins a column about editing, mostly as it is related to science. Its world will be the love of language and the work of the editor. I'll try to keep it informative, engaging, practical, and timely. I'll strive to alert you to new and helpful reference works or train a spotlight on neglected ones. I welcome your questions, comments, or quibbles.

What makes a document readable? Different rules and guidelines drive fiction and nonfiction, but some are universal, including the following:

Helpful formatting

Use sufficient "white space" around and within your text so that the reader's eye can quickly find the needed information. Think like an architect and build in "textual windows" to admit the (mental) light. Use numbered or bulleted lists to help the reader analyze and assimilate complex constructions. Short sentences and paragraphs are especially helpful to the online reader.

Directness

From Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*: "Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place." And use the active voice; it helps take the "Lab Land" out of the discourse—the mystical world wherein experiments appear to run unbidden, results magically appear, conclusions reach themselves, and no human agent seems involved. (How then to explain the authors' names—or did they insert themselves?)

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A telling vocabulary

In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995), the British scholar David Crystal illustrates beautifully the nuances available to the right word. He displays (p. 157) "28 lexemes belonging to the semantic world of 'madness' " in a word-wheel with the core word *mad* at its center (Americans would probably choose "insane"). The choices arrayed around the top of the circle include literary, academic, and technical terms; those on the bottom progress through colloquial, dated, and archaic and move on to recent terms that are whimsical or comical. Some of the choices are *psychotic*, *demented*, *unbalanced*, *mental*, *cuckoo*, *batty*, *crazy*, and *bonkers*, each suggesting a different writing style and circumstance.

Global English

Because of the Internet and World Wide Web, English is increasingly important as a means of global communication. A recent survey found that more people in China study English than live in the entire United States. Using words that bear two or more meanings in a global context causes misinterpretation—thus the recent rendering on a Web site of mad cow disease as "angry cow disease". Major differences exist even between British and American English. In *Notes from a Small Island* (1995), Bill Bryson estimates that at least 4000 words in the two main branches of English bear different meanings even though they are spelled identically. Bryson notes that the phrasal verb *make up* can mean "reconcile", "comprise", and "apply cosmetics". And how does one explain to a person who is new to English the three meanings of *run into* in the sentences "The dog

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Editorial: Learning from *Scientific American*

by Geoff Hart
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In their December 2006 editorial, the editors of *Scientific American* reported a vexing problem that should sound familiar to many technical communicators: like most print magazines, *Scientific American* has an average publication delay of about 3 months between the time an issue is “put to bed” and the time it appears in your mailbox. That delay is common to most traditional printed periodicals, but its magnitude varies among publications (newspapers, for instance, have much shorter delays). The delays arise from many factors that are common to all publishing processes, but for a glossy monthly such as *Scientific American*, some likely culprits include:

- Artwork sometimes can't be commissioned before the underlying text is available in nearly final form, and can then take days or weeks to produce and revise.
- Delays arise between final review and the start of layout, particularly when layout is outsourced rather than performed in-house.
- Various aspects of the proofreading process lead to additional delays.
- It's difficult to schedule large print runs with a high-quality printer, particularly if you're a monthly competing with weekly magazines that have larger print runs, such as *TV Guide* and *People*.
- Getting the printed copies into the distribution stream adds further delays because of intermediate steps added by distributors. Few publishers do their own distribution anymore due to the efficiencies provided by a large distributor; in exchange for the monetary savings, they accept distribution delays.
- Although first-class mail can cross continents and oceans in days, it's too expensive for most magazines. Instead, most are sent by “publications mail”, which is inexpensive but can take weeks to arrive. (A postal employee once told me such materials are only processed *after* mail from customers who pay full price.)

When part of your goal in publishing is to be timely, these delays pose clear problems, since your nimbler competitors—including daily newspapers, radio and television, and Web sites—have the option of publishing “breaking news” within hours or days. It was this problem that spurred *Scientific American* to a noteworthy innovation.

The news story that prompted their innovation was the discovery of a 3.3-million-year-old hominid skull, nicknamed “Selam”, leading

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STC's vision and mission

STC's vision: Technical communication is recognized as an essential part of every organization's competitive strategy.

STC's mission: STC advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and media so that both businesses and customers benefit from safe, appropriate, and effective use of products, information, and services.

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ran into the street”, “The car ran into the tree”, and “The man ran into an old friend”?

Careful proofreading

Unhook your eye from your mind. Editors are familiar with the tricky phrase “Paris in the the spring”. That case typifies many wherein the eye sees what the mind tells it to see—one *the* instead of two. Reversing the process—forcing the mind to see what the eye sees—is one of the hardest disciplines for a beginning editor to master. A spell-checker is a great help, but none can detect the difference between a “dumb waiter” and a “dumbwaiter” (see *Chuckle of the Month*, below).

Chuckle of the month

Real estate ad in the 27 October *Palo Alto Daily News*: “The state-of-the-art kitchen offers stainless-steel appliances, granite counters, custom cabinets, a water purification system, and a convenient dumb waiter.”

Reminds me of a restaurant I recently visited. Ω

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“The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

—John Stuart Mill, philosopher and economist (1806–1873)

Book review: *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*

[Kress, G.; van Leeuwen, T. 2006. 2nd ed. Routledge, New York, NY. 291 p., including index. ISBN 978-0-415-31915-7. US\$35.95 (softcover).]

by Jackie Damrau (jdamrau3@airmail.net)

Previously published in *Technical Communication* 54(4):511–512, November 2007.

Reading Images is a book that presents a solid background in the grammar of visual design. Throughout the book, Kress and van Leeuwen compare known grammar components such as nouns, verbs, and objects in properly written sentences to their visual counterparts in a graphic. They define visual design grammar as “producing attractive layouts, images and diagrams for our course handouts, reports, brochures, communiqués, and so on” (p. 3). In linguistic form, visual design can be expressed verbally and visually, yet both are markedly different in their own contexts.

Life started out with drawings (cave art), the first form of visual communication. We moved next to the written word as a major communication form. Kress and van Leeuwen stress that we lose focus on drawing once we start school: “materials provided for children make intense representational use of images; in materials demanded from children... writing remains the expected and dominant mode” (p. 16).

Writing for an international audience requires attention to the reading pattern and other cultural aspects of a particular country. Visual communication is not any different. Authors especially must become familiar with the cultures to which their written works may be translated to ensure that the graphics and color choices are not deemed offensive.

From a graphical perspective, Western society relies on geometrical shapes (squares and rectangles) to form mechanical, technological images that show specific order in human construction. We rarely use ovals or circles, except when framing personal pictures to provide a warm, caring feel. Circles are self-contained images that represent flow that stays in one uniform place. Rectangular shapes are stackable and thus dominate our

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outer constructions of architecture and diagrammatic expressions.

Kress and van Leeuwen note that visual symbol dictionaries define squares as representing “honesty, straightness and workmanlike meaning,” denoting the world and order, or power and oppression. Circles represent “endlessness, warmth, protection” or “eternity and the heavens,” while triangles convey direction. Triangles introduce processes or focus attention on specific messages, and are a generative power and represent action, conflict, and tension. The authors state, “Circles and curved forms generally are the elements we associate with an organic and natural order, with the world of organic nature” (p. 55), whereas angularity is associated with an “inorganic crystalline world” that we “understand fully and rationally” (p. 54–55). Curved forms we identify as dominant with organic growth rather than mechanical/technical construction.

Reading Images explains the concepts of narrative and conceptual representations based on the Actors (the ones who move) and the Goal (the ones to whom the movement reaches). It then compares representation and interaction on how the positioning of a graphic or statue in a museum reflects and affects our visual perspective subjectively or objectively. Viewing an art object subjectively refers to your being restricted by ropes or object placement from viewing the object up close. Objectively viewing an art object has no restrictions, thus allowing you to walk completely around an object to view it up close.

Graphics in written documents require attention to detail so that you lead readers to the right portion of the story or content. Kress and

van Leeuwen refer to positional placement of graphics by Given–New, Ideal–Real, and Center–Margin relationships. Positionally, visuals depict concepts differently when placed left to right or right to left. This difference is based on the concept of a Given–New composition, where Given is “something the reader is assumed to already know” and New is “something which is not yet known” (p. 180–181). We then look over the New more than the Given to gain an understanding of the message. Top to bottom visual placement reflects the Ideal to the Real. The Ideal compositional meaning makes it the most important or salient part of the page. The Real then presents

“Graphics in written documents require attention to detail so that you lead readers to the right portion of the story or content.”

specific information related to the Ideal. The Center–Margin visual placement puts the central element of the visual in the Center with supporting text or visuals around it positioned in the Margin. The Center thus becomes the nucleus, with the Margin elements being subservient.

Reading Images explains the concepts underlying visual design that are useful to know when designing graphical materials. Its greatest disadvantage is that the graphics are not provided in color, so you lose much of the detail needed for complete understanding. However, Kress and van Leeuwen have a special way of explaining colors represented in the graphics so that you can imagine what the objects might look like. Ω

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“Your average modern rationalist doesn’t understand the scientific world. He simply places faith in it, much the same way he place faith in what his doctor tells him, or his priest. All that belief is a powerful thing.”
—Elizabeth Bear, *Blood and Iron*

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“In science one tries to tell people, in such a way as to be understood by everyone, something that no one ever knew before. But in poetry, it’s the exact opposite.”—Paul Dirac

—
“Everything is vague to a degree you do not realize till you have tried to make it precise.”—Bertrand Russell

“The idea of something—an intellectual construct—is often more appealing and perfect (in a Platonic sense) than the thing itself, which always remains mysterious and ambiguous and messy, by which I mean that its sense is open-ended, never fixed. It is always wise, I believe, to see all our propositions (and stories) as provisional, partial, incomplete, and subject to revision on the basis of new evidence, which we can be sure is just around the corner.”
—Charles Johnson,
The End of the Black American Narrative

Book review: *Writing for Science*

[Goldbort, R. 2006. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT. 330 p., including index. ISBN 978-0-300-11793-6. US\$20.00 (softcover).]

By Linda Kenny Sloan (lksloan@informationuniverse.com, iubusiness@earthlink.net)

Previously published in *Technical Communication* 54(4):505–506, November 2007

Writing for Science is a comprehensive guide to the writing of scientific English for both students and professional researchers. It includes extensive coverage of the writing process within the different forms of scientific writing. Robert Goldbort defines and traces the history of scientific English, describes the different writing forms scientists use to communicate their research, and provides useful examples of its usage and practice.

The roots of scientific writing go as far back as Aristotle and Cicero.

Goldbort cites Francis Bacon as the founder of scientific English with the co-founding of the experimental sciences. The Baconian revolution in language turned writing into focusing on objective, plain, and concise language as opposed to the subjective “linguistic artistry” (p. 7) used to describe thoughts and ideas in a literary style.

The various forms of science writing covered in detail include laboratory notes, workplace writing, undergraduate research, presentations, dissertations, journal articles, and grant proposals. The section on perennially misused words and phrases is done very well, with the bad examples and the rewritten versions accompanied by an explanation within the text. The section on workplace writing, however, makes somewhat dry reading.

Goldbort discusses visuals for reports and presentations in both the presentations chapter and a separate chapter on the subject. He describes the use of color in two different locations in the book. Regrettably, the printing of the book entirely in black and white minimizes the effectiveness of this discussion and the example visuals included in the book.

For undergraduate students who may not be familiar with the IMRAD model (Introduction, Methods, Results, And Discussion), Goldbort’s discussions throughout the book will give them a firm foundation in it. The model finds its first use as an outline for laboratory notes, reports, and journal articles for both students and researchers. The IMRAD model is based on the structure of experimental research, which, for the student, culminates in the pinnacle of scientific writing, the doctoral dissertation. In this form, the model shows itself at its fullest with extensive coverage of the scientific process.

Proper formatting and documentation of bibliographic and citation references are essential for

professional development and recognition for one’s work. The proper citing of relevant research by others provides recognition of creditable research for both the author and those given credit in the current research. Style guides are an important part of preparing a report, journal article, or dissertation with the

proper formatting required by the professor or publisher. Goldbort gives extensive examples of citations from four style guides frequently used within scientific and technical publications:

- The Council of Science Editors’ *Scientific Style and Format*
- The *American Chemical Society style guide*
- The *Chicago Manual of Style*
- The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*
- The author also cites the Modern Language Association’s handbook for comparison to humanities research style.

An extensive discussion on information sources covers different types ranging from technical and scholarly to general and publicly available publications. It also ranges from printed books and journals to online databases, Web sites, and e-journal archives. The author also provides guidelines for evaluating online scientific information sources.

Overall, this book primarily meets the needs of science students and aids professional researchers who need advice on aspects of publishing their research and providing information to office colleagues. Ω

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Fun on the Web

Comics for nerds

XKCD, written by a recovering physicist, is described by its creator as a “webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math, and language”. Although some of the comics require a bit of scientific knowledge to fully appreciate their nuances, examples such as “Outreach” (<http://xkcd.com/585/>) provide nothing more than an entertaining view of the fact that science has consequences, and that the humor inherent in these consequences can be appreciated even if you're not a recovering physicist. Be sure to hold your mouse cursor over each issue to reveal the hovertext, which is occasionally funnier than the cartoon itself. Ω

Star Trek returns

Let's get the unpleasantness out of the way immediately: the entire Star Trek franchise has shown, at best, a cavalier and dismissive attitude towards science and scientific veracity. (Okay... I'm feeling *much* better now.) The new installment, with a fresh cast of characters, is no different. But if you can suspend disbelief and not pay too much critical attention to the plot, the characters have a seductive appeal that sometimes defies description, and the whole franchise is a heck of a lot of fun, which is why it's survived something like 40 years now and spawned new generations of fans with each new iteration. *Wired's* Natania Barron has a few relevant thoughts on Trek (<http://www.wired.com/geekdad/2009/05/a-new-generation-takes-the-helm-looking-at-the-legend-of-star-trek>). Ω

(Idea and URL contributed by Kathy Moore)

Comic book science

Comic book superheroes make even Star Trek look scientifically respectable, but they were an

important part of my youth and many readers of this newsletter will have similar shameful secrets to disclose. If you too have (radioactively powered?) skeletons in your closet, *Wired's* Corrina Lawson has just the book for you: *Was Superman a Spy?* is a collection of historical and other trivia about your favorite superhero characters of yore (<http://www.wired.com/geekdad/2009/05/comic-book-urban-legends-revealed-stump-your-kids-with-superhero-trivia>).

(Idea and URL contributed by Kathy Moore)

For a more respectful cartoon treatment of science, nothing beats Larry Gonick's *Cartoon History of the Universe* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cartoon_History_of_the_Universe). Worth a look, particularly if you have a youngster in the house who is just getting interested in science and history but who isn't yet ready to dive into textbooks. Ω

Neologism alert: *precedings*

Most scientific communicators are familiar with the word *proceedings*, which indicates a collection of the speeches, meeting notes, abstracts, formal papers, and other information presented at a meeting. Recently, in recognition of the growing need for researchers to establish their claims of “first publication” of a research finding, the term *precedings* was invented. A play on the word *proceedings*, a *precedings* compilation represents a collection of papers and other information that is published before it has undergone formal peer review and been published in a journal. The venerable and highly respected journal *Nature* is one of the first publishers to dive into this new medium (<http://precedings.nature.com>). As the journal's Web site says, *Nature Precedings* is a free online service “... that enables researchers in the life sciences to openly share preliminary findings, solicit community feedback, and claim priority over discoveries by posting preprint manuscripts, white papers, technical reports, posters, and presentations”. Ω

“There is nobody so irritating as somebody with less intelligence and more sense than we have.”—Don Herold

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“When two opposite points of view are expressed with equal intensity, the truth does not necessarily lie exactly halfway between them. It is possible for one side to be simply wrong.”—Richard Dawkins

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to much ado in September in the news media. Rather than waiting 3 months for their story to appear in print, when it would be “old news”, *Scientific American’s* editors chose an unusual alternative strategy: they published an early draft of the article on their Web site (www.sciam.com/ontheweb), where they treated the article as a work in progress and invited ongoing commentary. Based on feedback about how the article should be expanded and refined for the print edition, the author (Kate Wong) was able to continue her research and produce a deeper, richer, more correct article by the time the December issue finally arrived in mailboxes around the world.

If you occasionally produce software or other documentation, this approach should excite you. Imagine for a moment if we were able to post the skeletal forms of our user manuals and online help on a Web site and invite users of the software to provide ongoing feedback as the documentation set matures. Users of our product, whether timid neophytes or brash power users, would have a chance to point out holes in our documentation, highlight confusing or inaccurate writing, propose indexing keywords, and report errors. (This could be easily done during the beta testing phase that most software undergoes.) Based on that feedback, we could produce an increasingly accurate, complete, and high-quality documentation set by the time the product was ready to ship. Best of all, working in this manner would replace the conventional one-way dictation that documentation represents with a sense of ongoing dialog and partnership between writers and their audience. Although I chose to illustrate this approach for documentation, any other type of information (including *Scientific American* articles and other science writing) could undergo a similar evolutionary process.

This isn’t an entirely novel concept, since the approach I’ve described is how most open source software (www.opensource.org) is developed. It’s also the fundamental model that underlies blogs (“Web logs”, in case you wondered where that word came from) such as LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com), wikis such as the Wikipedia (<http://wikipedia.org>), and various other emerg-

ing tools for online collaboration, such as Google-Docs (<http://docs.google.com>). The idea is novel because it reminds us that, as communicators, we require an audience, and that audiences are not passive sponges that exist solely to soak up our words of wisdom. On the contrary, communication always involves both a speaker and a listener, and the most interesting and effective communication involves a dialogue between both participants.

Of course, like any elegant theory, there are potential traps we can fall into if we don’t pay careful attention to the dialogue and maintain a skeptical eye. Selection bias is a particularly serious problem, since the people most likely to respond by providing feedback may not be broadly representative of our overall audience. This means that we must be very careful indeed to subject the feedback to a reality check to confirm that it is broadly useful. Ignoring that problem can lead us to design information that does a great job of meeting the needs of only a small subset of our audience—specifically, those who aggressively use the Internet to seek information about how to use products. These people may still be the minority of our audience. Solving the problem of representativeness may require us to actively recruit representatives of several typical users of our information rather than relying solely on those who volunteer to provide feedback.

Version control and quality control are two other potentially serious problems. If *anyone* is allowed to modify the material we have produced, those who have an axe to grind or who simply desire to sow chaos can modify our information at a whim, leading to the loss of good work accomplished through previous iterations. Version control provides backups we can use to recover previous versions, but it’s not trivial deciding what old information to discard and what new information to retain. A robust backup strategy is also crucial, since Web sites can be lost when the hardware that supports them is damaged, whether due to flooding during a hurricane or a fire. Sabotage, whether it represents an active attempt to target us or purely random damage

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“Imagine for a moment if we were able to post the skeletal forms of our user manuals and online help on a Web site and invite users of the software to provide ongoing feedback as the documentation set matures.”

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inflicted by the latest Windows virus or worm, is also a possibility.

Quality control requires both active monitoring of the dialogue and a means of validating new information. Well-intentioned fools can easily damage our information by “correcting” things that required no correction, thereby creating misinformation. Wikipedia was forced to implement access controls to mitigate the problem of tampering, while still retaining an ability for readers to comment on entries in the encyclopedia. Allowing readers to comment on our information without such supervision can introduce factual errors, whether through simple ignorance or active malice. Although we have not yet seen widespread occurrences of industrial espionage, in which a competitor or other non-friend publishes information that attacks us, makes us look foolish, or introduces offensive and legally actionable statements on our Web site, there have been a few isolated incidents that give cause for concern. As publishers of online information, we are responsible for the consequences of that information, just as we are for our printed publications, even if someone else created the problematic information on our Web site. Thus, someone must take responsibility for vetting comments on our information and determining whether a comment is worthy of display and worthy of incorporating in the evolving body of information.

There are undoubtedly other problems with the use of the Internet to collaboratively evolve documentation or bodies of scientific information, and these will be discovered over time. Nonetheless, this phenomenon represents a promising new way to communicate with our audiences, and potentially a true revolution in the way we communicate. If you’ve considered testing out this approach to communication, contact me and let me know about your experiences. Better still, submit a full article that describes what you’ve done so others can learn from your work. **Ω**

Discussion groups

Scientific Communication community

STC and our community run an e-mail discussion group that provides a quiet, friendly place to turn for help if you’ve got any questions concerning scientific communication. To join, point your Web browser to:

<http://mailman.stc.org/mailman/listinfo/stcscsig-l>

There’s no cost to join, and you can expect a very low volume of mail. Of course, the more people who join, the more traffic there’ll be, so please join. It’s a great way to make the community work for you.

Editing

If your work involves lots of editing, consider joining the **Copyediting-L** e-mail discussion group, which focuses on editing in all its various forms. The group is not affiliated with STC, but you’ll find many STC members there. To join, point your Web browser to:

www.copyediting-L.info/

Technical writing

If you do a lot of technical writing, join us on **Techwr-L** to discuss the tools and travails of the technical writer. The group is not affiliated with STC, but you’ll find many STC members there. To join, point your Web browser to:

<http://lists.techwr-L.com/mailman/listinfo/techwr-l>