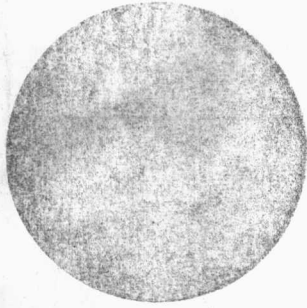
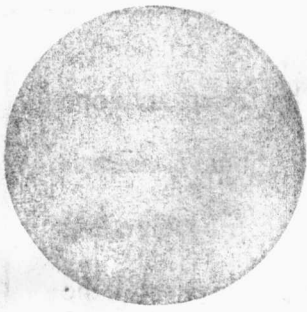


Writing Remedies

**Practical
Exercises for
Technical
Writing**





Writing Remedies

Practical Exercises for Technical Writing

By Edward H. Weiss



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ORYX PRESS
1990

The rare Arabian Oryx is believed to have inspired the myth of the unicorn. This desert antelope became virtually extinct in the early 1960s. At that time several groups of international conservationists arranged to have 2 animals sent to the Phoenix Zoo to be the nucleus of a captive breeding herd. Today the Oryx population is nearly 800, and over 400 have been returned to reserves in the Middle East.

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INTRODUCTION

Good Writing Is Rewriting

No one can write or dictate a first draft that is good enough to be a last draft. No one.

Effective writers know that no matter how good they are, their first draft is filled with bugs. Furthermore, they know that the best way to write is to push out the first few drafts quickly, allowing ample time to edit and revise.

Even though a good writer's first draft may be somewhat better than a bad writer's, **neither is fit to read.** People who send or publish their first drafts (this includes the new plague of un-proofread electronic mail) are harming their readers and themselves.

A Good Style Is Invisible

100 Writing Remedies: Practical Exercises for Technical Writing is based on the premise that good writers do everything they can to reduce the burden on their readers. Anything that makes a reader struggle or reread is suspect. In this view, a good style is **invisible**: Readers understand the message, without noticing the style.

Bad writers err in two directions. First, they make careless or ignorant mistakes—everything from misspellings to faulty grammar. Second, they show off and overburden their sentences—with pretentious vocabulary and marathon sentences. In short, bad writers make their style **visible**.

REMEMBER: The more time you spend editing and revising your writing, the more effective you will be in your profession. At first, editing may seem like a waste of time. Later, though, you'll see remarkable benefits in your career and in your relationships at work.

Hardly anyone will say that your writing has improved. Rather, they'll remark on how much smarter you seem lately.

How to Use This Book

100 Writing Remedies addresses the flaws I find most often in the first drafts of business and technical professionals--engineers, programmers, managers. Most people find 80% or 90% of their own problems presented here.

The problems in these sentences are called *bugs*. Although this book cautions writers against the careless overuse of computer jargon, still, the term bug is the most precise name that comes to mind. Like the bugs in computer programs, the problems in these sentences creep in unnoticed, the result of haste, laziness, carelessness, sometimes ignorance. And, as is true of the bugs in programs, there is more than one way to get rid of them. Editors (like programmers) may do anything to eliminate a bug--except add a new bug.

The material in this book is in eight parts, or eight "families of bugs." Each part includes

- a set of problem sentences containing the bugs
- a set of remedies (solutions for the problem sentences)
- a brief lesson on each bug, with additional examples

To use this book, read each problem sentence and look for its bug. When you think you've found it, revise the sentence and compare your answer with the corresponding remedy. If you missed the bug-- or if you want more information-- read the appropriate text.

Sometimes this process is harder than it sounds. Unlike arithmetic problems, problem sentences frequently contain more than one bug and can always have more than one solution. Often, you'll be convinced that your remedy is better than the one in the book. And you might even be right.

The goal is for us to agree on the main problem in the sentence, the important bug. When you revise it, do anything you like--so long as you don't add a new bug. An axiom of editing is that although there is more than one correct way to write a sentence, there are still many bad, incorrect ways. Contrary to what many believe, editing is NOT just a matter of personal preference.

Whose Rules?

Only 27 of the 100 problems listed here are truly errors—*forbidden* by the textbooks. Most of the bugs are matters of clarity and “correct style.” For example, splicing two sentences with a comma is an error (Bug # 83), but using commas to do two conflicting jobs in the same sentence is weak style (Bug # 84). Writing “the criteria is...” is poor grammar (Bug # 79), but using a phrase such as “the decision criteria model selection option” is terrible style (Bug # 46).

But, you say, isn't that just one person's opinion? Isn't style something that belongs to the individual? Like a toothbrush? Yes and No.

Although there are several acceptable ways to write, there are many more unacceptable ways. All the advice in this book, whether or not you agree with it, will in fact improve your writing and add to your professional effectiveness. The idea is not to change your style into mine. Rather, the goal is to increase the chances that your messages will get through—clear, clean, with power and results.

Good Writing Is Conservative

The most dangerous notion being taught these days is that any widespread practice of writing or speech will inevitably become acceptable. This mistaken notion allows writers to conclude that, since many of the bugs described here occur regularly in the writing of educated people, there is no cause for criticizing them. If everyone starts sentences with *due to*, how can it be wrong? If everyone misspells *supercede* as *supercede*, won't the dictionary eventually allow it?

The only reasonable position is that, even though language is always changing, not all changes are good for the language. English is hurt when it loses the distinction between *imply* and *infer*, just as it was hurt when it lost the distinction between *you* and *thou*.

In contrast, some changes in tradition are helpful. A more liberal use of dashes and “bullets” has made management communication easier to follow. And permitting sentences to begin with a numeral (1990 *will be a slow year*) is far better than asking writers to spell out the word *nineteen*.

Writing must never be as volatile as speech—because the function of writing is to permit communication across time and space. Most educated adults can understand English written 400 years ago (the King James version of the Bible). Most Americans can read books written by British authors of three centuries. Americans, Jamaicans, and Australians have considerable difficulty with each other's speech, but almost no problem with each other's writing.

Perhaps most important for the readers of this book, conservative style is the style preferred by most of the people who evaluate our work and award promotions. The irony is that even when our bosses are guilty of most of the infractions in *100 Writing Remedies*, they still want the rest of us to write according to the principles advocated here.

If you dispute something I have recommended, pursue the problem. (The authorities for my opinions are discussed in Appendix B.) If you believe my advice is dated, unwarranted, then form your own conclusions. And, if you're especially eager to debate a point, please write to me in care of Oryx Press.

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WORDS, In General

WORD PROBLEMS

The sentences below need editing. Each has one or more word problems. Look for

- misused and inappropriate terms
- three or four words where one will do
- misplaced words
- overblown, show-off vocabulary
- any other unfortunate, imprecise, or distracting word choice

1. I want to be appraised continuously of your progress.

(Remedy: Page 9)

2. The group was comprised of a manager and five programmers.

(Remedy: Page 9)

3. All employees seek a maximization of their compensation situation.

(Remedy: Page 9)

4. The task of the program troubleshooter is to remediate the mistakes made by the junior programmer.

(Remedy: Page 9)

5. The report was delayed by the courier shortage situation.

(Remedy: Page 9)

6. The consensus of opinion is that the job will not be entirely finished until October.

(Remedy: Page 9)

7. Their CRT was oval in shape.

(Remedy: Page 9)

8. It takes a longer period of time to update these files than to create them in the first place.

(Remedy: Page 9)

9. So as to be better able to explain the reason for this proposal, we must first explain our previous activities relative to the inventory control problem.

(Remedy: Page 10)

10. As the update had not been completed, we delayed the quarterly report.

(Remedy: Page 10)

11. Due to our truck drivers' strike, we do not know when your system will be delivered.

(Remedy: Page 10)

12. They had complaints with regard to the turnaround time.

(Remedy: Page 10)

13. The company utilizes a dynamic programming model for its market forecast.

(Remedy: Page 10)

14. At that point in time we were utilizing COBOL for the payroll program.

(Remedy: Page 10)

15. The system has a text justification capability.

(Remedy: Page 10)

16. Before we can turn the system over to the client, it is a requirement that we have complete documentation.

(Remedy: Page 10)

17. There is a possibility that they will beat us to publication.

(Remedy: Page 10)

18. In order to help them with their writing, we built style-checking software into the word processor.

(Remedy: Page 11)

19. In consideration of these objections, we are opening the purchase to competitive bidding.

(Remedy: Page 11)

20. Serious mistakes can be prevented by means of the use of effective training.

(Remedy: Page 11)

21. They rotated the passwords for the purpose of having better security.

(Remedy: Page 11)

22. In the event a real fire is encountered, the Fire Department will direct the evacuation of the building.

(Remedy: Page 11)

23. Notice the cost advantage which can be derived from using a data base management system.

(Remedy: Page 11)

24. The amount of administrative records on hand is out of proportion to the amount of program records on hand.

(Remedy: Page 11)

25. All of the necessary decisions were not included in the functional specification.

(Remedy: Page 11)

26. He found six good prospects at the convention, which was better than usual.

(Remedy: Page 11)

27. Programmers who talk about the good old days constantly bore the younger staff members.

(Remedy: Page 12)

28. Copies of the financial statement may only be given to members of the Finance Committee.

(Remedy: Page 12)

29. The new system will be totally dedicated to issuing benefit checks.

(Remedy: Page 12)

30. Their final offer was different than their first.

(Remedy: Page 12)

31. The boss told Jones he had problems.

(Remedy: Page 12)

32. No one believes the management will forget its promises.

(Remedy: Page 12)