



ASME International

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ASME
Council on Member Affairs
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Style Guide

The mission of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers is to promote and enhance the technical competency and professional well-being of our members, and through quality *programs* and *activities* in mechanical engineering, better enable its practitioners to contribute to the well-being of humankind.

STYLE GUIDE

I. INTRODUCTION

The style of writing has a great deal to do with the effectiveness and usefulness of a manual. A manual should say the same thing to all readers. It should be concise, authoritative, grammatically correct, and easy to read. Grammatical errors interrupt the reader's chain of thought and hinder his or her comprehension; therefore, they reduce the standard's effectiveness. Slang, coined words, colloquial terms peculiar to a particular area of the Society, and words that have to be looked up in dictionaries obscure meaning. This Guide suggests several means of avoiding these problems to produce a desirable style.

II. STYLE STRATEGIES

A. Consider the Audience

Writing should not be aimed too high. Who is going to use the manual? What is his or her background? Most business and technical journals are aimed at about the college freshman level. It may be assumed that the reader has a certain type of background in the Society, but familiarity with each unit's colloquial language or the special meanings of common words that have been adapted by that unit cannot be assumed. Even though the most likely reader of a manual may have a college degree or higher, the general reader should be kept in mind during the development and writing of a manual.

B. Use Short Sentences

Ideally, only one thought should be put into a sentence unless the thoughts are directly related or dependent upon one another. Reading tests show that the average sentence length should be about 20 words. This is not to say that all sentences should be this length, but 40, 50, or 60 word sentences, common in legislative writing, should be avoided. For clarity, a thought should be expressed concisely. Conjunctions and compound sentences should be used carefully.

C. Use Simple Words

Writers of manuals must use repetitive phrases such as "under the direction of the Board of Governors" and "shall be nominated by the Council from among its past or present vice presidents." Therefore it is important to avoid pretentiousness and use short (or at least familiar) words wherever possible. For instance, "use, show" and "start" can be

substituted for “utilize, illustrate” and “initiate.” Writing is only half of the communications job; the other half is understanding.

D. Avoid Verbosity

A common ailment in writing rules is the use of more words than are necessary to express a thought; for example:

Verbose	Alternative
in the event that	if
in the course of	during
large number of	many
is provided with	has
through the medium	by
for a duration of	for
failure, if and when it occurs, may	failure may

E. Avoid Passive Verbs

The passive voice makes writing less effective; for example:

Passive	Active
performs continuous review	continually reviews
is used in preference	is preferred
permits the control of	controls
performs the nomination of	nominates
alteration of the terms occurs	the terms alternate

F. Avoid Redundancy

A conscious or unconscious effort to emphasize a point causes redundancy; for example:

Redundant	Alternative
cancel out	cancel
balance against each other	balance
important essentials	essentials
duly elected	elected
various other committees	other committees

III. STYLE PITFALLS

A. Careful Use of Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs make things clearer and plainer. However, unnecessary modifiers may obscure rather than clarify meaning. In addition, qualifying words that do not lend themselves to objective measurement lead to ambiguity. For example, in the phrase “approved expenses,” by whom have the expenses been approved? What is meant by “eligible for nomination” if there are no requirements that define who is eligible? The writer should ensure that all modifiers have precise definitions.

B. Careful Use of Synonyms

Synonyms, particularly synonyms of terms, should be used with care. For example, members of International Chapters in one section of a Society Manual should not later be called foreign Members. A student design competition should not be called a student contest one time, a design program a second, and a student competition a third. Even at the risk of boring the reader with repetition, ambiguity should be avoided by expressing a term the same way each time that it is used. Conversely, the same term should never be used for more than one item, even if the context seems to clearly differentiate its meanings.

IV. ACRONYMS, NUMERALS, AND ABBREVIATIONS

A. Careful Use of Acronyms

Except for ASME, no acronyms are used in Society Manuals.

B. Careful Use of Numerals

Numerals are used in preference to spelled out numbers except when the number is the first word of a sentence or expresses a quantity less than 10. A number should never be spelled out and then followed by the numeral in parentheses [e.g., twenty-one (21) members]. In addition, dollar signs should never be spelled out [e.g., nine dollars].

C. Careful Use of Abbreviations

Abbreviations should not, as a rule, be used in text. Units of measure, however, should always be abbreviated in text when used with a numerical quantity, in nomenclature, in drawings, and in table captions and column heads.

V. CAPITALIZATION, UNDERLINING, BOLDFACE TYPE, AND ITALICS

A. Capitalization

Capitalization of initial letters generally should be used when referring to specific entities, and not generically.

B. Underlining

Underlining should not be used in Manuals.

C. Boldface Type

1. Emphasis should be noted by the use of boldface type, whether lower or upper case. Boldface for emphasis should be used sparingly.
2. Use of boldface combined with capitalization is permitted.

D. Italics

Italics should not be used.

VI. PROBLEM WORDS

A. Shall vs. Must

1. The word “shall” is always used in preference to “must” because it indicates that a statement is a requirement to be understood as mandatory and leaves no decision to be made by the reader.
2. For variety of style in conveying requirements, a sentence may be reworded in the active voice, as in the second example below. This style is particularly useful in describing procedures or listing steps to be taken or checks to be made.

Avoid

The Operation Guide
is to list

Use

The Operation Guide
shall list

B. Should vs. May

Use of the word “should” indicates that a statement is a recommendation, the advisability of which depends on the facts in each situation. “May” conveys that a recommendation is to be taken entirely at the reader’s option. That is, “should” is more forceful than “may.”

C. Assure, Ensure, and Insure

Assure, ensure, and insure are listed as synonyms in most dictionaries. In ASME manuals, use of “ensure” is preferred when the meaning “take steps to see that” or “make sure” is intended. “Insure” is used when financial matters of insurance are described (e.g., “the exhibit shall be insured by a qualified agency”). For consistency, “assure” should be avoided except when used in the context of “quality assurance.”

D. Inasmuch and Whereas

Words such as “inasmuch” and “whereas” tend to obscure the intended meaning.

Avoid	Use
Inasmuch	Since
Whereas	While

E. And/Or

When stating requirements, the term “and/or” should be avoided because it leaves the decision to the reader as to what is required. And/or statements should be reworded to clarify intent; for example:

Avoid	Use
Fellows and/or Honorary Members	Fellows, Honorary Members, or both

F. Gender Neutral Pronouns

Pronouns should be gender neutral. That is, “he or she” should be used instead of “he.” At times, the use of these pronouns becomes awkward and wordy. In such a case, the sentence should be rephrased.

The word “chair” should be used instead of “chairman” or “chairperson.”