



Corrigo

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Effective Onscreen Editing

*Geoff Hart**Part two of a four-part series*

Workflow Issues: Backups, Paper Trails and Automating Your Work

Murphy's law applies as strongly to online editing as it does to other areas of life, and at some point, you or Murphy will do something unfortunate to a file. So before you actually begin editing, make a backup copy of the original file and store it somewhere safe, far away from your computer. Then make additional backups of each version of the manuscript at each important stage so you won't have to start over from the beginning if something bad happens to the file. Follow this advice, and you'll always have something to go back to if you make a serious error; don't follow it, and you'll find yourself wishing you had, usually in the middle of a frantic rush to beat a deadline. At these times, Murphy's law is particularly likely to take effect, because that's when you're most hurried or fatigued and thus least likely to take the care you should take. The warning to back up your files is particularly important if you're new to online editing, since you won't yet have learned all the ways you can crash your software and how to recover from those crashes, but even old pros occasionally get careless or unlucky.

Precautionary Tales

Unfortunately, even good backups won't protect you against one common bad thing that happens to files: infections caused by viruses. New or inexperienced clients most commonly pass on these infections, but as the recent damage wrought by Melissa and the ILOVEYOU virus shows, even experienced computer users sometimes get infected. You can save yourself considerable grief by purchasing the most recent release of commercial antivirus software and keeping that software current by downloading updates from the vendor's Web site. Macro viruses, which are so far restricted to Microsoft Word, pose a particular problem, because they attach themselves directly to Word files and, unlike traditional viruses, function as soon as you open the infected file. Even worse, macro viruses are relatively easy to create, so new viruses appear regularly, and it can take some time before antivirus vendors develop solutions. Until they do, the tips in *Protecting Yourself From Microsoft Word* on page 3 can go a long way in safeguarding your data and your sanity.

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Protecting Yourself From Microsoft Word

Despite its power, Word has several known problems, most of which have easy fixes.

Immunizing Yourself Against Viruses

To protect your files from macro viruses:

1. Open Word's Tools menu, and select **Options**.
2. Click on the **General** tab, and ensure the **Macro virus protection** checkbox has a checkmark in it.

This isn't foolproof, but it does protect against simple macro viruses. For more protection, ask Word users to send you their files in "rich text format" (created using the Save As feature). This strips out all macros stored in the file. You'll lose some style and formatting information, but at least you won't have to worry about viruses. Because macro viruses (so far) affect only Word files, this last step isn't necessary if your authors don't use Word.

Save Yourself from the Save function

Word has sophisticated abilities to save files -- and a big hole in these abilities. Back when computers were much slower, developers created the Fast Save feature. This appends your keystrokes to the end of the file rather than saving an entirely new copy of the file. Unfortunately, as file sizes grow and changes multiply, Fast Save begins to greatly increase the file size and the risk of irrecoverable damage to the file. The increased speed in saving files with Fast Save simply doesn't compensate for these problems. To turn off this feature:

1. Open Word's Tools menu and select **Options**.
2. Click on the **Save** tab, and click on the **Allow fast saves** checkbox to remove the checkmark.
3. While the dialog box is open, click on the **Always create backup** checkbox to select this feature. Doing so creates a copy of your file with the file name followed by ".bak" each time you open a file. If you make a mess of the file or your computer crashes, you can open the backup file and start over.

See "Sidebar", p. 4

SIG Managers' Column

As a focus for SIG activity, the TE SIG uses a Web site provided by a service called eGroups. An eGroup site offers a variety of features designed to ease group communication, such as a list of members, a calendar, a message exchange and archive, a polling mechanism, and other helpful attributes.

The eGroup is not a listserv. It is a Web site where you can learn what's happening with the TE SIG, find other TE SIG members, view and post messages, and gain access to "Corrigo".

To get to the site, go to www.egroups.com/group/STCtecheditSIG. If you are not currently a member of the eGroup, you will not be able to move beyond the group's main page. To join the group, click on **Subscribe**. You will be prompted to fill in a member profile.

Because we want only TE SIG members to be able to gain access to the site, your subscription is not active instantly. Instead, when you submit your subscription, the site moderator receives a message. When your subscription is approved, you receive a message in turn. From then on, you will be able to peruse the members list, read the newsletter, view and post messages, and so on. (Currently the system is set up so that messages can be posted only with approval from a site moderator.)

Please feel free to provide as much or as little personal information in the member profile as you care to share with your fellow TE SIG members. The profiles are a great way for TE SIG members to learn how to get in touch with other individuals in the TE SIG. Because access to the site is limited, your contact information is reasonably secure. You can change, add and delete information from your profile at any time.

We hope you will use and enjoy this system for group exchange. Please let us know how you like it!

*Diane Feldman
Patricia Tierney*

“Onscreen”, continued from p. 1

Even Onscreen Edits Need a Paper Trail

That’s the worst of the bad news. The rest of the problems represent inconveniences rather than things that truly threaten your sanity. The largest remaining problem is that most organizations require a “paper trail” of some sort so managers or editors can determine whether important changes were made and who made (or vetoed) each change. With printed documents, you can create paper trails by adding the most recently edited printout of a manuscript to an ever-growing pile in the file cabinet, retaining the old copies until the manuscript is published, then archiving the files somewhere. But how do you handle computer files?

The general solution for computer files is much the same as it is for paper documents: Create a computer directory that holds named or numbered versions of the files. For example, store the original manuscript in that directory as “original.doc”; the July 1, 1999, version as july01-1999.doc; and so on. (Pick names that are meaningful to you and your colleagues.) If necessary or appropriate, create two versions for each date: one with the review comments, and the other after you’ve accepted or rejected those comments. At any time, you can return to one of these earlier versions of the manuscript to confirm what the author originally said or to start over again if the current version of a file has become damaged beyond repair (e.g., by a virus). If your needs are more complex, specialized document- or version-control software can make the process much easier. Whichever approach you choose, you should develop a method as simple to use and as rigorous as the paper-based method it replaces if your client or employer requires you to maintain a paper trail.

Who Shall Edit the Editors?

This raises the issue of how to determine which of your edits the author accepted and what (if any) new text, comments or rebuttals the author inserted. Just as in printed documentation reviews, someone (usually the editor or the author’s manager) must take responsibility for ensuring that the author

“Sidebar”, continued from p.3

4. You should also select the Save auto recovery info every... checkbox, and pick a frequency that works well for you. With this option selected, Word regularly saves versions of your open files that are more up-to-date than the automatic backup files. If your computer crashes while Word is open, the autorecovery information will generally let you recover most of the work you did right up to the crash by opening the files in the autorecovery directory.

Most modern word processors have comparable features, and it’s worth your while to find out about them and figure out how to make them part of your work. Doing so provides considerable peace of mind when you’re working under deadline pressure.

addresses review comments satisfactorily. In the absence of a formal mechanism to ensure that someone approves the author’s revisions, authors can easily reject important changes and make additional changes without leaving any clues as to what they did. Most word processors offer a “compare documents” feature that lets you spot such problems, but the comparison facilities can be primitive. (One colleague discovered that the function had stopped working on a large file midway through the comparison.) More to the point, the only way to ensure quality control is to appoint someone to monitor changes and to enforce a consistent, predictable workflow that ensures the corrections are made. Although automating a workflow can help you attain a quality product, it can’t take the place of human intervention.

If you have a good relationship with your authors, you can trust them to discuss review comments with you before they reject them out of hand and to use the software’s revision-tracking feature to mark any additions they make. Though this can work well, it’s not fool-proof, because it’s easy to forget to use (or to actively disable) the software’s revision-tracking feature while making changes. One somewhat draconian, yet effective, approach involves providing authors with a “read only” copy of the file, while the editor retains the original. (Each word processor does this differently, although most let you protect files by

See “Onscreen”, p. 5

“Onscreen”, continued from p. 4

requiring a password before you can modify them.) Authors can review the proposed changes and indicate (by annotating the file) which ones they disagree with, but they have no authority to implement or reject any of the changes themselves. The editor subsequently reads these annotations and transfers the resulting changes to the original copy of the file. The biggest problem with this approach is that it can offend some authors, who quite rightly suspect that you don't trust them to take proper care in reviewing your edits.

Automating Your Edits

Tools such as spell checkers, grammar checkers, and the search and replace function can greatly facilitate your work. Each is important enough that I'll discuss them in their own sections later in this series of articles; here, I'll elaborate on my recommendation in the previous issue that you customize your word processing software to make your editing more efficient.

All modern word processors offer an invaluable tool: the ability to create simple keystroke combinations that provide access to a longer sequence of menu choices or commands.

These shortcuts go by various names but are most commonly known as macros. When you record a macro, the software watches your keystrokes and mouse movements and stores them for future use so you can replay them with a single command or a single menu choice. (For example, Microsoft Word lets you assign these macros to toolbar buttons or keystrokes, and PageMaker lets you create a floating palette of “scripts.”) Assigning each macro to a keyboard shortcut tends to be the most productive (because you don't have to remove your fingers from the keyboard), but that may not suit your working style. Recording simple macros can let you achieve some surprisingly good results, but if you enjoy programming, you can develop more sophisticated macro routines by learning the software's programming language.

Most experienced onscreen editors develop macros based on their needs. The macros you develop will depend largely on your work habits and the nature of the work you're doing. Typical macros include procedures to:

- Increase the size of all text (e.g., to 14 points) to make it easier to read.
- Reverse the order of two words or letters.
- Globally search for and replace double spaces with single spaces and groups of five or more spaces with tabs.
- Insert standard text for a comment or query (e.g., “This reference is missing from your references section; please insert it there or delete the citation.”)
- Toggle between various modes in the software (e.g., switch between revision tracking and normal typing)

The next time you edit a manuscript, pay attention to the corrections you perform frequently and those you perform infrequently but are time-consuming to do via the software's menus. Ask yourself whether these steps are sufficiently common or repetitive that you should automate them. A short investment of time in watching your editing behavior can produce enormous paybacks in terms of saving time later on.

Style Is Everything

Another important time-saver is creating an online style sheet that you can keep open in another window for quick reference. (Style sheets are lists of decisions, such as the spelling and capitalization of certain words and how certain key words or terms have been defined and used.) Editors who work on large or complex projects on paper typically create and maintain correspondingly large and complex style sheets, which rapidly become difficult to use because of paper's limitations as a means of organizing and retrieving information. In contrast, you can easily alphabetize or sort an online style sheet as required, and you can search through it using the software's search function rather than sorting through a stack of paper by hand. Better still, you can submit your final style sheet to a client's production staff, who benefits greatly from having the style sheet available without having to retype it or decipher your handwriting.

Part three of this four-part series will appear in the next issue of the newsletter.

Back to Basics: Sentence Structure

Susan Price Harvey

The life of a technical editor is fast-paced and demanding, and no one wants to add another item to the editing checklist. However, sentence structure is important and deserves special attention in all documents. Here's a short refresher course in sentence structure that you can take to the author of any document.

Six Basic Guidelines

1. A sentence must have three elements:
 - i) a subject
 - ii) a verb
 - iii) a complete thought
2. Sentences are composed of phrases and/or clauses.
3. Phrases do not have subjects and verbs; all clauses have subjects and verbs.
4. Dependent clauses (DCs) have subjects and verbs, but they don't express a complete thought:

Since Sally wrote this report. This clause doesn't express a complete thought.

5. Independent clauses (ICs) contain subjects, verbs and complete thoughts.

Sally wrote the report. This clause has a subject (Sally) and a verb (wrote), and it expresses a complete thought. It is a sentence in its simplest form.

6. To vary sentence structure, combine clauses in various ways.

Compound Sentences

To form compound sentences, combine two or more independent clauses using coordinating conjunctions (CCs), adverbial conjunctions (ACs) or semicolons, as in any of the following three methods:

Comma and coordinating conjunction (IC, CC IC).

Sally wrote the report, and David will edit it.

See "Basics", p. 7

Levels of Technical Editing Booklet

As part of its GuideLine series, the Council of Science Editors has published a new booklet, "Levels of Technical Editing", by David E. Nadziejka. This booklet presents a new concept of levels of editing, containing a major change in the levels system as put forth in the original Jet Propulsion Laboratory publication of 1980. The reason for this change is the following premise:

For technical documents (intellectual, scholarly or highly complex documents in any field), the primary editorial focus must be to help ensure that the technical content is complete, accurate and understandable to the intended audience. A technical document might be typographically perfect, have excellent design and page layout, have no grammatical errors, and be stylistically impeccable, but all of that is pointless if the technical content is unintelligible or flawed.

This levels system was devised primarily for editors who work directly with authors, whether freelance or employed by an organization, and who are responsible for substantive editing of documents in addition to language and format concerns. Three levels of edit are specified in this guidebook: the Rush Edit, the Standard Edit and the Revision Edit. All three are explicitly levels of technical editing (i.e. all deal in some way with not only the traditional editorial concerns of language, grammar, format and style, but also the technical content of the document.)

The booklet is available from the Council of Science Editors, 11250 Roger Bacon Drive, Suite 8, Reston, Virginia 20190. The cost is \$8 for Council members and \$12.95 for nonmembers, plus shipping. The Council can be reached at (703) 437-4377, (703) 435-4390 (fax) and CSE@CouncilScienceEditors.org.

David E. Nadziejka has been a technical editor for 20 years, editing in the fields of engineering, natural sciences, medical sciences and economics. He is currently the managing editor at the W.E. Upjohn Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is currently writing a book on technical editing based on this concept of levels of edit.

“Basics”, continued from p. 6

Semicolon, adverbial conjunction and comma (IC; AC, IC).

Sally wrote the report; therefore, David will edit it.

Semicolon (IC; IC).

Sally wrote the report; David will edit it.

The seven coordinating conjunctions are: for, and, nor, but, or, yet and so.

Adverbial conjunctions are words such as therefore, however, consequently, meanwhile, nevertheless and thus.

Complex Sentences

Another type of sentence structure is the complex sentence, which has at least one dependent clause and one independent clause. In the complex sentence, one clause is more important than the other. In the case of the sentence below, a subordinating conjunction (because) creates the dependent clause. Other subordinating conjunctions are since, while, when and if.

Because Sally wrote the report, David will edit it.

“Because Sally wrote the report” is a dependent clause; it doesn’t express a complete thought. “David will edit it” is an independent clause.

Notice the comma after the dependent clause. When you reverse the clauses and the independent clause comes first, you don’t use a comma.

David will edit the report because Sally wrote it.

The formula for using complex sentence structure is:

- IC DC. Don’t use a comma if the independent clause comes first.
- DC, IC. If the dependent clause comes first, use the comma.

Compound/Complex Sentences

To create even more sophisticated sentences, try using a combination of the compound and the complex sentences.

Because Sally wrote the report, David will edit it, and Mary will create the graphics.

Varying sentence structure is not difficult in the editing process, and although I’ve given only a few ways to create structure, many more are available. Relative pronouns (who, whom, whose, which, that) also can introduce dependent clauses, and phrases can be used as subjects and objects, but that’s another article.

Buzzword Babylon

John Baer

Our language, and especially the language of the technology industry, is constantly being inundated with new words. Some of these words are “legitimate”, and others are merely farcical buzzwords. Who’s to say which are which? I say, “If the word fits, use it!”

This column is dedicated to highlighting a few of these new words that have found their way into the current lexicon. I’ve chosen the following words because either they are related to technical communicating or they are just plain fun.

Automagically is used when the user knows what the end result has to be but doesn't know the technical details.

Example:

“Our program will **automagically** create a window on your desktop.”

Evergreen is used to describe a Web site that is updated on a daily or other frequent basis.

Example:

“Because our Web site is **evergreen**, its data is always right!”

Hyperarchy is an excessive office hierarchy where at least twenty levels of management pecking orders separate the receptionist from the CEO.

Example:

“Given the **hyperarchy** of his new company, Mark figured he’d be a VP in about seventy-five years.”

Slice and dice is to break a body of information down into smaller parts so it can be understood better.

Example:

“Better **slice and dice** the spec so the marketing crowd will get it.”

Sosofo (specification of a sequence of flow objects) is a set of statements that describes how a sequence of document elements fits into a document.

Example:

“That document is gibberish; please send its **sosofo!**”

Twip (one-twentieth of a point) is a measure used in laying out space on a page or other area that is to be printed or displayed on a computer screen.

Example:

“It looks all right, but you might want to move it over a **twip** or two.”

Zombie is an abandoned and out-of-date Web site.

Example:

“That old Web site has been a **zombie** for months.”

Heard any cool, interesting or funny buzzwords lately? Please send them to John Baer (along with an example of correct usage) at jbaer@vanteon.com.

After several years of selling scientific instruments, followed by several more of software tech support, John Baer became a technical writer in 1992. He writes end-user documentation for custom software and web applications, creating hard copy manuals and online help systems. Like most of us, John is a devoted "Web-head" and is also a self-proclaimed Word Man.

Tips From the Cubicle

Caring for Your Editing Eyes

Patricia Bartley

Remember to **blink ... blink ... blink**. Blinking during the day can help lubricate the eyes, which become dry from staring at your computer screen. Don't forget to look away from your screen periodically and focus on a distant object. Here are some exercises to help reduce eye strain and strengthen the muscles around the eyes.

Eye movements help stretch, soothe and relax the eye muscles. Practice the following when your eyes feel tired or strained from reading, computer work or fluorescent lighting. Keep your head still, and move your eyes slowly while taking deep breaths.

↕ **Vertical.** Look up, pause a few seconds, then look down. Repeat three times

↔ **Horizontal.** Look left, pause, look right. Repeat three times.

↖↘ **Diagonal.** Upper right/lower left. Repeat three times then reverse ↗↙. Repeat three times.

🕒 **Clock rotation.** Imagine a big clock in front of you. Starting at noon, gently move your gaze around the clock. Repeat 2 times then gaze counter-clockwise. Repeat two times.

Blink ... blink ... blink, then do **palming**.

PALMING: Rub your palms together several times to create warmth. Bring your palms up to your eyes. Feel your eyes relax and tension melt away. Hold for 10 to 30 seconds. Breathe deeply and imagine each breath is sending fresh oxygen to your eyes.

Patricia Bartley works as a customer survey developer, online editor, and Website manager at the Department of Labor and Industries. When she is not working at her computer, she teaches cubicle yoga to office workers.

She is a certified yoga teacher and is registered with Yoga Alliance, a national credentialing organization for yoga teachers. She is also certified to teach stress management in the workplace. For more information call (360)709-0065 or e-mail bartley99@webtv.net.

STC Conference Information

Future STC Annual Conferences

48th Annual Conference
May 13-16, 2001
Chicago, Illinois.

49th Annual Conference
May 5-8, 2002
Nashville, Tennessee.

50th Annual Conference
May 18-21, 2003
Dallas, Texas.

51st Annual Conference
May 9-12, 2004
Baltimore, Maryland.

52nd Annual Conference
May 8-11, 2005
Seattle, Washington.

Future Regional and Chapter Conferences

Region 1
InterChange 2000
October 17-18, 2000
Boxborough, Massachusetts.

Region 5
Navigating the New Century
October 13-14, 2000
Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Region 6
Patterns of Communication
September 24-26, 2000
Kansas City, Missouri.

Region 7 & 8

Pan Pacific Conference
October 18-21, 2000
Waikiki, Hawaii.

For more information about these and other non-STC conferences, go to www.stc.org/Conferences.html or www.stc-va.org/fconference.htm.

How I Became a Technical Editor

Randell Prue

I can't think of a more effective tool for a writer or editor than to sit down and test the document. Do it: Follow the instructions that are about to be published. When you sit down to describe what you experienced, the product will be better as a result. In research circles, anecdotal evidence is often discounted as worthless. Nonetheless, the retelling of my own experience has produced documentation that garnered both critical acclaim and a high degree of reader acceptance.

You can't argue with success!

This article responds to one of the topics proposed for *Corrigo* — technical editor by accident. I don't think that the circumstances I found myself in are unique, where the absence of a technical editor requires technical writers to take on the task themselves, with no standards defined and no job description.

How Did it Happen?

Hired as the only technical writer for the maker of hardware/software speech-recognition solutions on the so-called bleeding edge, I was solely responsible for the accuracy of release notes, user's guides and installation manuals. I had access to developers, functional prototypes and finished product.

Over 14 months, the growth of the company left me at various times with up to five writers, no manager and no editor of any kind. My role was defined as supervisor, but had I not acted as editor and technical editor, the help desk, the company's image and the usability of the product would all have suffered. The potential cost of certain errors was extremely high.

The Worst

The most serious error that was about to be published in the printed manuals and in our online help was a set of instructions to move or copy a portion of the system's data to a different place in the filing hierarchy.

When I followed the instructions from the developers (the authors of the code), I succeeded in erasing the data to be moved, but I

could not move the data. Under the right circumstances, the competitive edge that this error could have given to one of our competitors would be lethal.

I found out afterward that this error was introduced during the process of improving the software. The method described had worked in previous versions, and as a result of my testing, the method was corrected prior to release. Because the documentation had to be completed and sent to press before the correction to the product happened, I removed the erroneous instructions from the documentation. There were other ways of moving data within the system that did work and were accurately documented.

If a user of our system had ever erased data by following our instructions, we could reasonably have been held responsible for the cost of recovery. As you can imagine, recovery could include several temporary workers and/or overtime. Covering all these expenses could easily exceed the money earned by the sale of the system.

Not So Bad

Even if the error had had far less serious repercussions, it would nonetheless have created confusion, delays and a reduction in the quality of our service to our customers. My recommendation to try the instructions yourself demonstrates the process and mind-set that I recommend for all writers and editors.

Another incident involved a junior writer circulating a memo to all writers that the company's main fax number had been changed and should immediately be changed in all manuals and documents. Here is where having an inquiring mind, which I consider essential to a writer or an editor, comes into play. When I heard about the new fax number, I asked myself why a company would change its fax number, making all stationery and business cards obsolete? In our case, I thought that it might have to do with telephone system integration, a major factor in the development of our product.

See "How", p. 11

“How”, continued from p. 10

I investigated why the telephony aspect of our product might cause our fax number to change. I started with the front desk receptionist, who assured me that our fax number had not changed.

Two or three inquiries later, I discovered that the help desk had installed an additional fax machine. During the installation of our system at the client site, facsimile transmissions between the installer and the help desk were required. The installation process was accelerated by eliminating the delay caused by routing the faxes from the front desk to the help desk.

As a result of verifying the accuracy of the material to be published, all the bad stuff was prevented. All writers were instructed to ignore the change and to undo changes to the fax number. Additionally, the new fax number was added to the installer’s manual with an explanation of when and how to use it.

The Best

In independent benchmark testing, our documentation received a higher score than did any other component of the product, and was rated higher than any of our competitor’s documentation. Did I feel that warm, fuzzy feeling you get from a job well done? Definitely, but the tangible career progress that followed felt even better. In the aftermath I received an offer that my employer could not match and I could not

refuse. This event resulted directly from accuracy and attention to detail.

On a regular basis, I made it a point to sit down with developers (a fancy name for software programmers) and have them show me how a feature or module worked. The experience was usually the same — the developer explains how it’s supposed to work — convinced that it will work as described because it worked under test before it was integrated and began to interact with other segments of program code.

“Would you mind showing me how that works?” I would ask.

I could not count the number of times that this question resulted in a live demonstration of product failure, leading to correction and a better product. The best writers we had followed this same practice of verifying everything. When I left, the company was in the process of recruiting an editor. Not a technical editor. I think they believed that their quality assurance process and validation by developers was adequate. I believe otherwise. I believe that a technical editor (or a technical writer who does his or her own technical verification and editing) contributes to product quality and accuracy in a way that no one else is positioned to do.

Randall Prue is a freelance writer, editor and publisher. His web site, www.jacinet.com/~randall, contains samples and links to published works. He can be reached by e-mail at randall@johnabbott.qc.ca.

WANTED

Informative articles for the TE SIG newsletter.

To produce a newsletter, we need articles. Now is your chance to contribute to the newsletter and share your editing knowledge with your peers.

Please send your article in now. E-mail your article today to john.jaillet@home.com.

Join PAMPA Today

People Against the Maniacal Proliferation of Acronyms Needs Your Help.

*Jaime Fuhrman
Dr. Stephen Osborne*

I knew I'd gone too far — that I needed help — when I named my son an acronym. He's called Jeff, the word made by his initials, instead of James, his actual name.

I was so immersed in the world of environmental regulatory-speak that I thought acro-naming SOP. My husband, shooting OI b-roll with the BTS beta-cam for the local PBS station, KAID, seemed to think the idea sound. Jeff's god-mother, at ESII doing a DEQ RCRA inspection at Mod3, where the PCBs are stored, didn't object. The only objection came from the grandfather — James.

Acronyms. Not just a problem for the technical writer, they've invaded every aspect of modern life, and each discipline has its own lexicon: mountain bikers, appliance salespeople, builders, architects, police officers, firepeople — even musicians (anyone know what the REO in REO Speedwagon stands for?) and artists.

There's one woman in our agency who always speaks in full words. She's considered odd — a few fries short of a Happy Meal — or, as we say in state government, a couple letters short of an acronym.

Like so many of the problems we face as writers and editors, acromania stems from a failure to consider the audience. If you're writing a memo to a fellow policy wonk (FPW), the following sentence is simplicity and clarity incarnate:

“In accordance with NEPA, DOE conducted an EIS for the proposed AMWTF at the INEEL, which would treat TRU for shipment to WIPP.”

In fact, to spell out the seven acronyms would make the sentence so long and cumbersome that even wonks might lose the thread. Within one's own hermetic community, acronyms are convenient shorthand. But when we venture outside our offices, acrobattiness wins us no friends. The preceding example, for instance, says to readers one or more of the following:

- I'm in the know; you're a complete idiot.

- I don't care if I communicate with you, as long as I impress you.
- I'm a faceless bureaucrat and have earned the right to talk like one.
- I don't know what the hell I'm talking about, and I'm attempting to hide that behind a wall of gibberish.

At this point, you're wondering, “So what guidelines for acronym usage do these SOBs have?” Thank you for asking.

First: Use acronyms sparingly — no more than six or eight per sentence.

Second: Use only felicitous ones. In our business, hazardous waste has ugly acronyms, while water, the more poetic medium, has lovely ones. The federal haz waste regs are in RCRA, which sounds like Bluto gnashing his teeth after being foiled by Popeye. By contrast, our state water-quality program conducts the Beneficial Use Reconnaissance Project, better known and said as BURP. (We're not making this up.) So never work in hazardous waste.

And finally, always spell them out the first time they're used in a document, as EPA does in the Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance (OECA) Workbook (WB): The Timely and Appropriate (T&A) Enforcement Response to High Priority Violations (HPVs).

Above all, don't let these pseudo-words control your life. Don't become such an acronaut that you start naming your children after them. We know we're spitting into the wind on this one — that acromania is an inevitable result of the fragmentation of our lives and languages in this post-modern age. Maybe we are just gray old ornery farts (GOOFs). Nevertheless, the madness must stop with someone, somewhere.

Join PAMPA ASAP!

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Both are faceless bureaucrats.