



New Mexico Supercomputing Challenge

Technical Writing Tips and Tricks



Ten Technical Writing “Do’s”

1. Identify your writing goal.

The more specific and clear the goal, the better the process will be for both your research and your report.

2. Plan.

This cannot be emphasized enough. Lack of planning leads to more work later in the project.



Ten Technical Writing “Do’s” continued

1. Use active voice and be consistent and appropriate with tense.

Passive voice has its place, but it is rarely if ever called for when writing a report for a science project. In the active voice, the doer is in the subject position in the sentence. It is a stronger and generally shorter construction. In addition, with passive voice you cannot always tell who is performing the action. Finally, research shows that readers understand active sentences more rapidly than passive ones.

Keep your introduction, methods, and discussions in the present tense and your results in the past tense.



Ten Technical Writing “Do’s” continued

3. Be clear.

Keep thoughts separate; write simply, concisely, and logically.

4. Use tables and figures.

Tables are appropriate when it is important to convey actual numerical values; use figures when showing relationships.

5. Use bullet points and numbered lists.

In any sequence of three or more items, consider a list format. Use numbers only if the sequence is important—for everything else use bullets.



Ten Technical Writing “Do’s” continued

6. Explain acronyms, abbreviations, and jargon.

Spell out or explain upon first use and give the abbreviation, if any. Then use that abbreviation throughout the rest of the document. If you have many acronyms, abbreviations, and other terms, consider adding a glossary.

7. Quote and note your sources.

Cite your sources in the body of your report, and give the full reference in the references section. For example, citation can be (Williams et al., 2001) or [1]. If numbered, make sure the references are numbered in the sequence in which they appear in the body of the report; otherwise list alphabetically.



Ten Technical Writing “Do’s” continued

9. Ask for both technical and non-technical reviews.

Find reviewers who are knowledgeable in the science, others in the writing, and have them review a fairly early draft so you can get feedback.

10. Proofread and rewrite repeatedly.

Set your report down for a couple of days, then go back and read through it carefully, making edits as you go. Repeat the process and refine your document. Look for mistakes, typos, breaks in logic, ambiguity – anything that detracts from a clear report that is easy to read



Ten Technical Writing “Don’ts”

1. Avoid writing as you speak.

The mind reads differently than it listens – it expects simple, declarative, and straightforward written sentences. Ambiguity often creeps in when you write as you speak.

2. Avoid redundancies.

If you have repeated the same phrase or concept in consecutive sentences, rewrite and combine or otherwise eliminate the redundancy. If you bring up a topic once and then have to remind the reader again, it generally means that you drifted off point. Remove the intervening material and place in a more logical location.



Ten Technical Writing “Don’ts” continued

3. Never cite a paper you have not read.

If you cite a paper based on someone else’s interpretation, you may be compounding the interpretation error of the other person.

4. Never put methods in a results section, or vice versa.

Do not start a results section with a reiteration of the methods. The order of the results should duplicate the order of the methods you gave and which you used to achieve those results.



Ten Technical Writing “Don’ts” continued

5. Do not waste a sentence referring a reader to a table or figure.

Give the important information from that table/figure and put the table/figure number in parentheses (Table 2). If you have nothing important to say about the contents of a table or figure, eliminate it.

6. Do not start sentences or paragraphs with:

There were, It is, To, In, On, In order to, During, At, Similarly, or an abbreviation.

7. Do not make your report humorous.

What is amusing to you may be offensive or incomprehensible to your reader.



Ten Technical Writing “Don’ts” continued

8. Do not use “very” as a qualifier or use contractions.

“Very” anything is superfluous in technical writing, and contractions are too informal (don’t, won’t, shouldn’t, can’t).

9. Do not use gender-specific or gender-biased terms.

Rewrite or find a gender-neutral way to say the same thing.



Ten Technical Writing “Don’ts” continued

10. Do not work without a plan.

It may be tempting to sit down and just start writing, but doing so creates extra work for you and for others later on. And it pretty much guarantees inferior logic and construction. Without a plan, new information cannot easily be incorporated into your document as the project progresses. You will, in fact, run into a host of problems without a plan.

Follow the report template and fill it in with an outline. You may make the outline more detailed as you go.

Use a Table of Contents, and keep track of terms, acronyms, and abbreviations where first used.



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Thank you!

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