NEVER IMAGINE YOURSELF NOT TO BE WRITING OTHERWISE THAN WHAT WOULD APPEAR TO OTHERS OR MIGHT NOT APPEAR TO OTHERS, TO BE CONFUSING OTHERWISE, or English Meets Technology (How Do You Do?)

By Mary Dickey

"Write intelligible English? Of course I can! After all, I've been speaking it all my life."

But can you write well? How easily *do* your readers follow your trains of thought? Technical people are usually highly competent in their chosen fields, but their writing is often riddled with obfuscations, ambiguities, and omissions. The reader must either waste time trying to find sense in the confusion or, more likely, avoid the effort and read something else. I read mountains of technical writing. It's a major part of my job. Sometimes I wish it wasn't. (Wait till you see the examples I've included.)

Almost any technical job requires communicating some sort of information to someone else. At a minimum this information concerns work in progress, problems, and results. New employees have to report to their superiors. Later, with little experience, they'll have jobs that involve directing subordinates, preparing written and oral briefings and reports for customers, writing proposals to potential customers, and authoring articles for publication in professional journals.

Scientists and engineers rarely receive much training in composition. What training they have had was probably camouflaged by an assigned topic such as "Robert Browning's Use of Imagery." Technical training understandably emphasizes technical skills, while writing skills are often considered less important. The techniques involved in writing the essay on Browning's poetry, however, are precisely the same as those used in preparing a technical report or a briefing. In each case the author needs to convey an idea or series of ideas to a particular audience. He or she must write to that audience, using a style that is clear and to the point, with language which is neither overly simplified nor overly complex. Grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and paragraph development are all useful tools for demonstrating clear thinking and technical expertise. Without them, written work frequently comes out as garbage.

This grammatical gem appeared recently in my mail at work:

"I am pleased to advise you that: through the individual efforts of each employee to meet their responsibilities; the careful conscientious and regular checking by Monitors and the use of incident reduction techniques that various groups have developed, we have achieved a significant improvement in safety records."

Or consider the following example of classic gobbledygook:

"ABC Corporation, working in conjunction with the XYZ Company's Technical Director will assist in the solicitation of the required information by preparing as a part of the methodology, the form of the solicitation, and by consultation with its own internal staff of technology experts, the biographies of whom are listed in Chapter 10, to establish not only the state-of-the-art, but also identification of where the cutting edge of technology developments on a discipline-by-discipline basis, are being performed and thus whom to solicit."

Do you understand that? It was written by a respected scientist. Luckily the editor caught it before it was sent to the customer — but what if it had gone out? What would customers think of the writer's competence?

Confused writing takes various forms. Even when the writer writes grammatical English, his ideas sometimes get so tangled that the result bewilders the reader: "We also recognize that organizations develop groups whose functions is to accomplish some capability. These groups' sole abilities may well be to develop this capability and therefore continue to advance the need for ever greater improvements in the state of the capability."

Technical people generally write to and for other educated people, but the audience may be less knowledgeable than the writer in the particular subject. Each scientific and engineering discipline has a lanugage of its own, and the reader may not be familiar enough with the topic to know its particular catch words. More importantly, he may not be willing to spend time to learn them. Since you are writing to be read, it is up to you to take the time and trouble to present your material in a form the reader is willing to read. For example, it is very easy to supply too many details: esoteric mathematical proofs are appropriate if you are addressing mathematicians, but they will be meaningless to your company's Vice President for Finance.

In some situations, however, the audience requires very specific explanations and rationale.

"The experimental data produced from the first test run showed much more positive results than we had anticipated. We predict an equivalent degree of positive results from this proposed second phase of testing. If it proves as successful as we expect it will, the cost of manufacturing the item will be much reduced, coupled with a much more efficient product."

This paragraph is much too vague to convince anyone to spend half a million dollars to fund Phase 2; it needs detailed supporting data to defend the author's position.

Science and engineering professionals *do* need good writing skills. Since all technical jobs require written reporting at some level, the engineer or scientist should be capable of producing a well-composed paper which is free from confusion and which uses correct grammar and punctuation. These skills are essential to ensure a company's reputation with its customers — and the engineer's or scientist's own advancement within the company.

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Readers Take Note:

Admirers and defenders of the English language are encouraged to send to *Beyond* samples of the odd doublespeak gobbledegook so often found in technical materials. The point of all this is to *have* fun, not poke fun. We'll pay a whopping $25 for each contorted, convoluted (and fully credited) ruination of English we print. Send the boners to Beyond Techspeak, 1680 N. Vine Street, Suite 900, Hollywood, CA 90028.