Communicator

House Style

Introduction

The Editorial Team edits items to comply with the *Communicator* House Style. It helps us and preserves the integrity of your submission if you comply with this style.

Writing style

Tone

We aim to achieve an authoritative but readable tone in *Communicator*. Avoid extremes of both formality and chattiness: the tone of modern user guides is generally acceptable. Write concisely: for example, write 'to' rather than 'in order to' and 'on' rather than 'upon'.

Spelling

Use the following conventions:

- British English

- The -ise variant in words like civilisation

- Prevailing spellings in computer contexts, such as 'dialog' and 'disk'

Singular-plural agreement

Remember that words like 'team' are singular, even though they refer to more than one person. We use the same convention for organisations: 'the ISTC has' not 'the ISTC have'.

Note: Avoid '(s)'. Recast the sentence as a simple singular or plural where possible. If you need to emphasise that there may be one or more, repeat the noun in singular and plural forms.

Gender-neutral writing

Do not use masculine pronouns to represent both genders. It is often possible for authors to avoid problems in this area if they consider their approach before starting to write. There are several alternatives:

- Use plurals (**readers** … **they/their**); this is often appropriate, as articles often describe multiple content creators producing material for multiple readers. Avoid using plural verbs with singular nouns (**the reader** … **they/their**) — this is acceptable to the editors of many publications now but ISTC members often dislike it and consider it to be grammatically incorrect.

- Use the second person: speak to the reader directly with 'you' and 'your' or possibly include yourself as a fellow technical communicator with 'we' and 'our'.

- Use 'he or she' and 'his or her'. This becomes clumsy if used more than once or twice. Avoid 'he/she', 'his/her', 's/he' and so on.

Abbreviations

Use the following conventions:

- Write terms in full on first use, followed by the abbreviation or acronym in parentheses. Where an abbreviation is better known than its expansion, put the expansion in parentheses on first use instead.

- In general, do not abbreviate terms that occur only once or twice and do not use informal abbreviations ('info' for information or 'MS' for Microsoft).

- Do not use full stops in acronyms (US, ATM) or names (M J Newell).

- Avoid ampersands except where they occur in names (such as the names of organisations or publications). Occasionally, we may use ampersands where space is short, for example in tables.

Latin terms

Prefer English to Latin, particularly Latin abbreviations. Write 'for example' rather than 'e.g.' and 'that is' rather than 'i.e.'. Use other Latin abbreviations, such as 'etc', only when unavoidable. Do not use 'etc' with 'for example': the latter implies a list that is not exhaustive. Use Latin words where the meaning is well understood and an English equivalent is less concise, for example *ad hoc* and *vice versa*.

Parallelism in lists

All items in a list should use the same grammatical form. For example, if you were listing appliances in a kitchen, all the points might simply be nouns:

- Cooker
- Refrigerator
- Washing machine.

If you were explaining how to use a washing machine, you might use a series of complete sentences, each with the same grammatical form (here starting with verbs in the imperative mood):

- Put the items to be washed into the drum.
- Close the door.
- Turn the control knob to the required cycle.

Numbers

In general, write numbers from one to ten in words, numbers above ten in numerals. Within a phrase, be consistent (from one to twelve). When using numbers in different roles within a sentence, exercise your discretion ('20 four-cylinder engines' or 'thirty 12-inch bolts'). Use numerals for percentages (45%), measurements (15m) and ages (12 years old). Never start a sentence with a numeral, even when the number is more than ten: 'Fifty-seven runners started the race' rather than '57 runners started the race'. Use words for approximations if preferred (about a hundred, over a thousand).

Members of our profession

Be sensitive to the fact that the ISTC represents specialists in various areas of scientific and technical communication: be as inclusive in your terminology as you can without impairing readability. In particular, the term 'technical communicator' includes illustrators while the term 'technical author' does not.

In a similar vein, when writing generally use 'organisation' rather than 'company' or 'firm'. The former encompasses government departments and non-profit bodies as well as commercial operations.

Presentation

Punctuation

Use the following conventions:

- One space after a full stop
- No space before units (1.2cm)
- No space or initial capital on 'website'

Note: Show URLs for websites as www.\<name\>. If there is no www. in the address, show http://\<name\>.

- No full stops or colons at the end of headings
- Full stops to terminate points in lists of complete sentences
- No full stops to terminate points in lists of words or phrases but one on the last point in the list
- No comma before words like 'and', 'or' and 'but' (except where items in a list are long or contain commas, in which case a comma or semicolon may be needed, or where adding a comma clarifies the meaning, such as 'the product is available in red and green, and blue and yellow')
- Single quotation marks (and double quotation marks for quotes within quotes)

Note: If you need to identify a colloquialism, use single quotation marks but use such terms sparingly. For example: London taxi drivers must prove they have 'the knowledge' before being given an operator's licence.

- No ordinals on dates (12 January 2001, not 12th January 2001)
- Ellipsis character for ellipses, not three or more full stops (use sparingly)
- Few exclamation marks and never more than one at a time
- A greater-than symbol in file names and menu options (for example, Tool > Options > Edit).
- Hyphens in e-mail, e-business and similar words

- No hyphens in offline, online and similar words
- Hyphens to create compound adjectives using two adjectives (leather-bound book) but not using an adverb and an adjective (fully supported initiative)
- En dash as a joining signal, with no spaces on either side, for example 23–54 or London–Paris
- Em dash as a separating signal, with a space before and after it — like this (the text will be set with thin spaces in place of the standard spaces)

Incorrect use of apostrophes is one of the most criticised aspects of writing so we must get them right:

- Possessives: the apostrophe comes after the owner (Bill's pen, the dog's ball). If there is more than one dog, the apostrophe moves after the 's' (the dogs' ball). For plural nouns, the apostrophe moves back before the 's' (the children's ball, the people's princess). **Exception:** the possessive 'its' is similar to 'his' and therefore does not have an apostrophe.
- Contractions: use an apostrophe to represent missing letters (do not = don't, I am = I'm) but avoid using too many contractions.
- Plurals: do not use apostrophes in plurals of numbers and acronyms (1990s, ATMs).

Case

Use upper case sparingly:

- A single initial capital in headings
- No initial capitals for nouns apart from recognised terms, such as 'Dynamic Systems Development Method (DSDM)', 'Internet', 'Broadband' and 'World Wide Web' (but not on 'website' and other derived terms)
- Initial capitals for titles only if they represent specific people, that is 'Bill Jones, Technical Author' but 'a technical author writes manuals'
- Capitals for all letters in acronyms, even for terms that can be read as words (such as 'NATO' and 'AWOL').

Text attributes

Use bold type for menu options and dialog names.

Use italics for emphasis, foreign words that have not been fully assimilated into English and titles of freestanding publications such as books and periodicals (use roman type with single quotes for titles of articles and chapters).

Note: *New Hart's Rules* (ISBN 0198610416) is an excellent reference for presenting text. In most cases, *Communicator* complies with its suggestions.