

# The 10 commandments of technical writing

Are they still relevant?



# Jean Rollinson

Who am I?

I am a technical author and Fellow of the ISTC. My main experience is documenting software but I also have a particular interest in language and grammar. I am a regular contributor to the Editing column in *Communicator*.

# The 10 commandments of technical writing

Are they still relevant?



So what are my 10 commandments?

Well here are a few examples that I have been sent or found on the Internet...

As drawn up by attendees of the March 2018 meeting of the ISTC Thames Valley Area Group:

1. Thou shalt have no gods before context.
2. Seek reviews and ye shall find.
3. Remember the style guide and keep it wholly.
4. Love thy user.
5. Thou shalt not document falsely (unless thou art in marketing).
6. Thou shalt not murder the English language.
7. Thou shalt not misuse punctuation.
8. Thou shalt not commit without commentary.
9. Thou shalt cleave unto consistent terminology.
10. Thou shalt give what is needed when it is needed.

Or from [www.proofreadnow.com](http://www.proofreadnow.com)

1. Thou shalt conduct research about thy product or service.
2. Thou shalt organize content in a logical and easy-to-follow layout.
3. Thou shalt determine publishing requirements before creating a final draft.
4. Thou shalt write for thine audience.
5. Thou shalt communicate with style.
6. Thou shalt be concise and quickly get to the point.
7. Thou shalt use direct and plain language.
8. Thou shalt show readers what they need to know with visual aids.
9. Thou shalt highlight all applicable legal requirements.
10. Thou shalt have someone else review your work.

Snaffled from a presentation by Mikey Ariel (Senior Technical Writer at Red Hat Academy)\*:

1. I am the one and only voice.
2. Thou shalt not take the audience in vain.
3. Thou shalt have no other workflow before the official workflow.
4. Remember documentation in your release schedule, to keep it holy.
5. Honor thy contributors and thy community.
6. Thou shalt not overkill.
7. Thou shalt steal, re-use, and adapt.
8. Thou shalt make unto thee diagrams, screenshots, and code examples.
9. Thou shalt not commit ambiguity.
10. Thou shalt covet simple grammar.

\* <https://speakerdeck.com/thatdocslady/the-ten-commandments-of-technical-writing>

Here are my suggestions, but without the flowery Biblical language:

1. Know your audience.
2. Only include what is necessary when it is necessary.
3. Context is everything.
4. Keep it simple.
5. Use complete sentences.
6. Be consistent in terminology and formatting.
7. Follow the style guide.
8. Use images where appropriate.
9. Reuse.
10. Avoid ambiguity.

1. Know your audience

## Example basic persona for a typical end user

Name: Rebecca Anderson

Age: 26

Education: Honours degree in Business and Marketing

Department: HR

IT experience: competent end user, learns the basics of new applications quickly, needs more guidance with complex tasks

Hobbies: abseiling and rock climbing



2. Only include what  
is necessary when it  
is necessary

## What is necessary?

Do all procedures need an introductory paragraph?

Where do I include concepts?

Is reference material necessary at all in this document?

## Consider:

What does the user need to know at this point?

Where in their journey are they?

What might they have already read, if anything?

3. Context is  
everything

- the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood
- the parts of something written or spoken that immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning
- the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning

## SME

- Subject matter expert
- Small to medium size enterprise
- Service management enterprise
- Systems management entity
- Society of Manufacturing Engineers
- School of Military Engineering
- Storage management engine
- Secure mobile environment
- Short message entity
- Senior management executive
- ...

4. Keep it simple

This example of a rambling sentence takes a lot of deciphering:

“Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

Words and phrases to avoid	Alternative
allows you to see	shows you
ascertain	find out/discover/determine
commence	start
easily	
in order to	to
is able to	can
just	
locate	find
please	
simply	
utilised (unless you are using it strictly according to its meaning, i.e. make practical and effective use of something)	used
wish	want

## Split infinitives

Probably the most well-known example is from the opening of the Star Trek TV series – “to boldly go”. Somehow “to go boldly” just doesn’t have the same impact.

## Ending sentences with a preposition

One famous example (although it may well be apocryphal) is from Winston Churchill who allegedly said in response to criticism of ending a sentence with a preposition: “That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put!” Although, in this example the verbal phrase is ‘to put up with’ so it’s not really an example of ending a sentence with a preposition.

Equally inelegant are phrases such as ‘With whom are you going to the cinema?’ instead of the more natural ‘Who are you going to the cinema with?’

For example, I would write,

1. Click the Insert tab on the ribbon.
2. Click the Table tile.
3. Select your table options.

Rather than

4. Click the Insert tab on the ribbon then click Table and select your table options.

The report can also be used to identify what actions need to be taken.

You can also use the report to identify what actions need to be taken.

This will need to be corrected by...

You need to correct this by...

The date should be set to the following day.

You should set the date to the following day.

5. Use complete sentences

6. Be consistent in terminology and formatting

# Equation, formula or mathematical expression?

In very simplistic terms:

Equation: any expression with an equals sign

Formula: set of instructions for creating a desired result

Mathematical expression: a finite combination of symbols that is well-formed according to rules that depend on the context

# Can you see the differences?

– hyphen

— minus sign

– figure dash

— en dash

— em dash

— horizontal bar

X lowercase letter

× multiplication sign

7. Follow the style  
guide

- UK or US English?
- Capitalisation decisions
- Spelling decisions (-ise or -ize? focussed or focused? onscreen or on-screen?)
- procedure, process or method?
- Punctuate bullet lists?

8. Use images where  
appropriate

# 9. Reuse

- b. Base the new department/team/staff member/Core\_T Core Task/Diverted Diverted Task/Downti Downtime/item/employee position/source system/Core Task Group/Diverted Task Group on an existing one. To do this:
  - i. Highlight the department/team/Core\_T Core Task/Diverted Diverted Task/Downti Downtime/item/employee position/source system/Core Task Group/Diverted Task Group you want to use as the starting point.
  - ii. Click [AddNew/the + icon]
  - iii. Click [Copy].

This opens the Departments/Teams/Staff Members/Core Tasks/Diverted Tasks/Downtime/Employee Positions/Source Systems/Core Task Groups/Diverted Task Groups/Setup dialog, with all the fields are filled in apart from Name, Short Name and Description.

- 4. Click [AddNew/the + icon].  
The Staff Members/National Holidays/Roles/Setup dialog box opens for you to enter the details
- 5. Enter the details. The following table gives guidance for some of the fields.

Field	Description
Total_P Total Productivity	This determines whether the Downti Downtime is included in the Total Productivity calculation. Including Downti Downtime Total Productivity, so you should only include items that you can control, e.g. downtime because of a software upgrade. In general, you should include items such as sick leave.
Name	Enter a name for the Core_T Core Task. Use a name that your colleagues will understand easily. Use your organisation's naming convention. Your manager or AOM_s AOM Coach should have told you about any required naming conventions.
Short Name	Enter an abbreviated name for the task. This name can be used in the Report and Planning screens.

# 10. Avoid ambiguity

We saw her duck.

We looked at a duck that belonged to her.

We looked at her quickly bend down to avoid something.

We use a saw to cut her duck.

He fed her cat food.

He fed a woman's cat some food.

He fed a woman some food that was intended for cats.

He somehow encouraged some cat food to eat something.

Look at the dog with one eye.

Look at the dog using only one of your eyes.

Look at the dog that only has one eye.

The dog has found an eye somewhere, and we're looking at that dog.

The guards let small men and women exit first.

Here 'small' may modify just men or men and women

Teachers and students of the speaker received priority seating.

And here 'of the speaker' may mean just students of the speaker or teachers and students of the speaker.

*Let's eat grandma.*

Or.

*Let's eat, grandma.*

Are we being cannibals or simply inviting grandma to sit down to dinner?

And another infamous one where the punctuation completely changes the meaning:

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

A woman; without her, man is nothing.

And a longer example

Dear Mother-in-Law,

It was a shame you had to stay here. For such a short time, I thought I might have coped, but it was unbearable. Seeing you leave, the relief was immense. When I heard we might see you again soon, I wanted to end it all. By saying goodbye now, I hope I will not have to say it to you again for a long time. If you have the opportunity to spend Christmas elsewhere next year, please do.

Not much love

Matthew

**With different punctuation becomes:**

Dear Mother-in-Law,

It was a shame you had to stay here for such a short time. I thought I might have coped, but it was unbearable seeing you leave. The relief was immense when I heard we might see you again soon. I wanted to end it all by saying goodbye now. I hope I will not have to say it to you again for a long time. If you have the opportunity to spend Christmas elsewhere next year, please do not.

Much love

Matthew

# Conclusions

Simply Yes, these commandments, my list and the other examples are still relevant.

Any questions or comments

# Finally a bit more about me

## Hobbies

The music you heard as you came in was *Tall Ships* by Ron Godwin recorded by the wind orchestra that I play with.

And here are some pictures of me in one of my favourite places.

