Developing Quality Technical Information
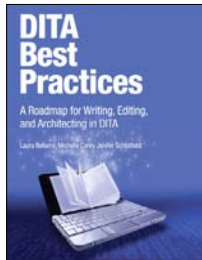
A Handbook for Writers and Editors

Third Edition

Michelle Carey, Moira McFadden Lanyi, Deirdre Longo,
Eric Radzinski, Shannon Rouiller, Elizabeth Wilde

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The IBM Style Guide
Conventions for Writers and Editors

By Francis DeRespinis, Peter Hayward,
Jana Jenkins, Amy Laird, Leslie McDonald,
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ISBN-13: 9780132101301

The IBM Style Guide distills IBM wisdom for developing superior content: information that is consistent, clear, concise, and easy to translate. This expert guide contains practical guidance
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Filled with many examples of correct and incorrect usage, *The IBM Style Guide* can help any organization or individual create and manage content more effectively.

To make the sentence easier to read, the revised passage uses two shorter sentences, which also moves subjects closer to their verbs and reduces the cognitive load.

Too many modifying phrases and clauses

Technical information must be precise. However, if a sentence contains too many modifying phrases or clauses, the information is difficult to comprehend. Shorter is better, but creating short sentences in technical information can be challenging.

Be careful about stuffing sentences with too many relative clauses, which are clauses that start with *who*, *which*, or *that*.

Original

> Use the **crawlSecure** command, which you can run from the index server, to start crawlers that will index websites that are protected by a firewall.

The original sentence starts simply enough, but it then uses three relative clauses.

Revision

> Use the **crawlSecure** command to start one or more crawlers to index websites that are protected by a firewall. Run the command from the index server.

The revised passage turns two of the relative clauses (*that* clauses) into a simple clause and a short phrase:

Original	Revision
which you can run from the index server	*Run the command from the index server*
that will index websites	*to index websites*

Avoid truncating relative clauses to participles because relative clauses are easier to translate. For example, don't change *that are protected by a firewall* to *protected by a firewall* even though the second phrase is shorter.

Prepositional phrases can also add too much modification in a sentence. Prepositions are necessary for connecting and modifying words and phrases, but too many in one sentence can make the sentence difficult to comprehend.

Original

> To address long response times during periods of heavy traffic on the Support site, the team studied the effects of keyword placement in the company's web pages.

The original sentence has five prepositional phrases:

during periods
of heavy traffic
on the Support site
of keyword placement
in the company's web pages

Revision

> To address long response times when Support site traffic was heavy, the team studied the effects of keyword placement in web pages.

In the revised sentence, two of the prepositional phrases (*during periods* and *of heavy traffic*) were converted to a clause, which has a subject and verb: *when Support site traffic was heavy*. Also, *on the Support site* was reworded to avoid another prepositional phrase. The revised sentence contains only two prepositional phrases.

Eliminate wordiness

Wordiness buries the meaning, adds to translation costs, reduces customer satisfaction with your product, and wastes users' time. Wordiness is even more detrimental in user interfaces, where you have less room to explain concepts or provide instructions. To help users understand your information and complete their tasks, make every word count. Eliminate words that do not contribute to the meaning.

Roundabout expressions

Roundabout expressions, such as *due to the fact that*, use several words where one or two or none will do. In speaking, people often use extra words to gain time to think about the next thing to say. In writing, however, these extra words hamper the meaning.

How many roundabout expressions can you find in the following sentence?

Original

> Given the fact that you have created an object, it can operate in a manner independent of the other objects based on the same class.

The original sentence uses several roundabout expressions:

given the fact that
in a manner
based on

The sentence also uses a long verb phrase (*have created*), which is unnecessary and adds to the wordiness.

Revision

> After you create an object, it can operate independently of other objects of the same class.

The revision cuts away the excess words and more succinctly gets to the point.

The following roundabout expressions are wordy and can often be reduced to one or two words:

Roundabout expression	Concise term
a great many	many
a variety of	various, different, many, several
as long as	if
as well as	and
at present, at the present time	now
at this (that) point in time	now, then
despite the fact that	although, even though
due to the fact that	because
during the course of	during
for the most part	usually
given the condition that	if
in an efficient manner	efficiently
in case of a	in a
in conjunction with	with
in many cases	often
in order for	for
in order to	to
in spite of	despite
in the event that	if, when
is possible that	maybe, perhaps
of an unusual nature	unusual
on account of the fact that	because
once in a while	occasionally, sometimes
on the other hand	however, conversely, alternatively
quite a few	several
whether or not	whether
with regard to	about

The expletive construction is another type of roundabout expression. An *expletive* is a grammatical construction that places the subject of the sentence after the verb, for example, "There are expletives in technical information." English has three expletives: *there is/are*, *here is/are*, and *it is*. Although expletives are grammatically correct and useful in some circumstances, they are wordy, contain weak verbs, and make your ideas less direct.

Pairing an expletive with a relative clause is a common problem that is easy to fix. For example, *there are* is an expletive in the following sentence, and that expletive is followed by a relative clause (*that are available for late-model engines*):

Original

> There are several types of turbo chargers that are available for late-model engines.

Revision

> Several types of turbo chargers are available for late-model engines.

The sentence is much more succinct when the expletive and the relative pronoun (*that*) are deleted.

You might not be able to remove every expletive, but you should weed out as many as possible, especially the ones that occur with the relative pronouns *who*, *which*, and *that*.

Redundancies

Redundancies occur when you say the same thing twice, such as *group together* or *step-by-step procedure*. To keep your writing succinct, eliminate redundant text.

Original

> The DXD specification describes the minimum records management requirements that must be met based on current regulations.

In the original passage, the idea of a requirement is repeated: a requirement is the same thing as something that must be met.

Revision

> The DXD specification describes the minimum records management requirements based on current regulations.

You can correct the redundancy by removing one of the repeated items. In the revised sentence, the relative clause *that must be met* is removed.

The following words are often used together, especially in speaking, but their meaning is so close that one word is enough.

Redundancy	Succinct expression
adequate enough	sufficient, enough, adequate
advance planning, warning, or preview	planning, warning, preview
by means of	by
cancel out	cancel
combine together, connect together	combine, connect
create a new	create a
end result	end, result
entirely complete	complete
every single	every, single
exactly the same	the same
grow or increase in size	grow, increase
group together	group
integral part	part
involved and complex	complex
is currently	is
new innovation	innovation
one and only one	one