

TECHNICAL WRITING

Revised Edition

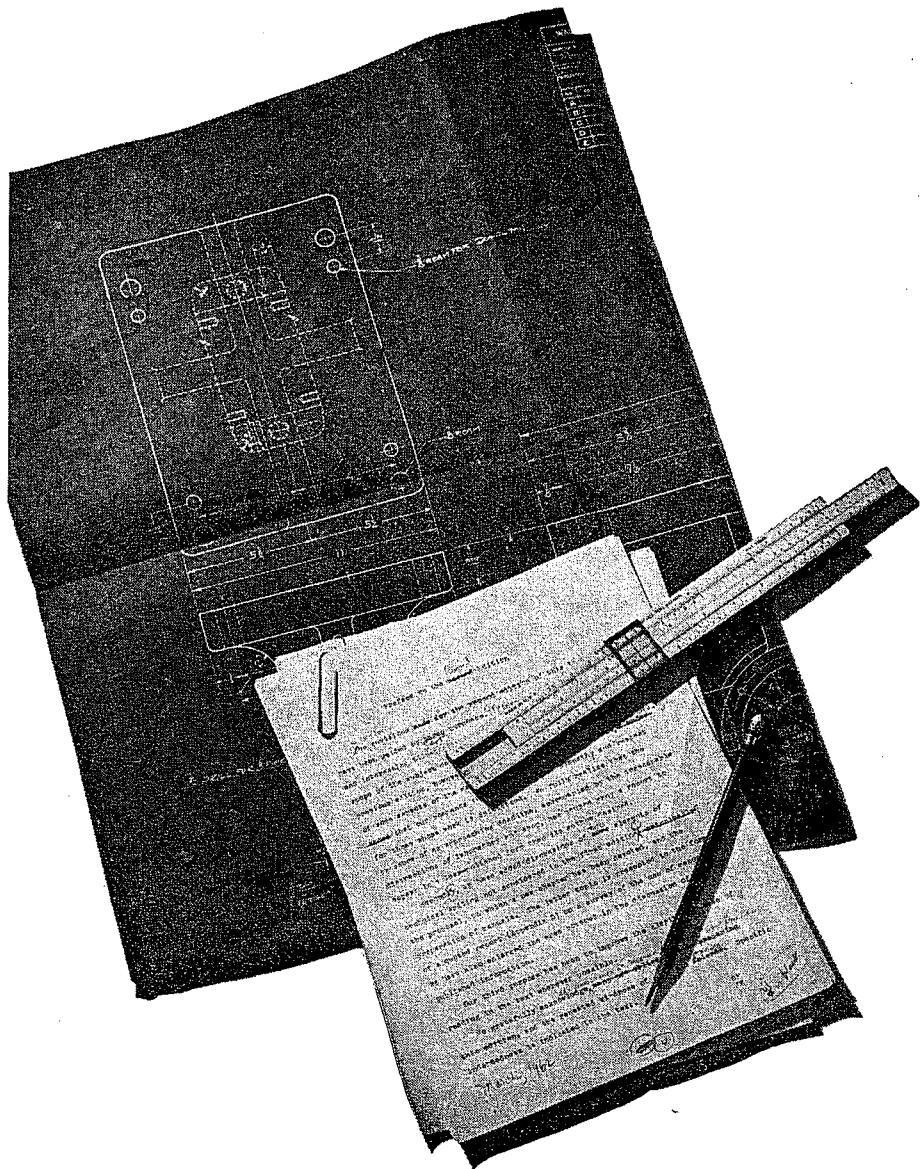
GORDON H. MILLS · *The University of Texas*

JOHN A. WALTER · *The University of Texas*

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18 - Style in Technical Writing

the report may be given to men who are not familiar with the work we had to do before the report could be written.

The Scientific Attitude

Although it is necessary to write with the interests of the reader clearly in mind, it is also customary to keep the style of the writing strictly impersonal. One of the distinguishing characteristics of technical style is an absence of any attempt to arouse emotion. The point of this is, of course, that personal feelings must be excluded so that attention can be concentrated on the concrete facts. Achievement of this objectivity chiefly depends on the use of the proper grammatical voice and the maintenance of a calm, restrained manner.

Long-established convention dictates that formal reports be written in the third person, generally in the passive voice. The theory is that exclusion of personal pronouns produces a style consistent in tone with objectivity, and that the use of the passive voice permits placing emphasis on the subject matter of the report rather than upon the human beings who worked with (or on) the subject matter. The following two sentences illustrate this principle:

1. *First Person Singular, Active Voice:*

I set up the testing equipment in the laboratory and ran three tests before I reached the conclusions stated in this report.

2. *Third Person, Passive Voice:*

The testing equipment was set up in the laboratory and three tests were run before the conclusions stated in this report were reached.

The second version represents the style most commonly found in technical reports.

Other acceptable and sometimes desirable ways of handling the grammatical voice and person are available, however. Here is one:

3. *Third Person, Active Voice:*

The staff of the Testing Laboratory set up equipment and ran three tests before reaching the conclusions stated in this report.

In this sentence, an objective, third-person noun is substituted for the personal pronoun of version one, and an active verb is substituted for the passive verb of version two. Since active verbs are more vivid and emphatic than passive verbs, this third version has a real advantage in its combination of impersonality and vividness. Unfortunately it has a disadvantage too: repetition of the words "the staff" throughout a report would probably become tiresome. To some extent this disadvantage can be overcome by use of a completely impersonal third-person noun:

4. *Third Person, Active Voice:*

The three tests gave results that led to the conclusions stated in this report.

Still another possibility that permits impersonality of tone, if properly handled, is the first person plural pronoun "we":

5. *First Person Plural, Active Voice:*

We ran three tests before reaching the conclusions stated in this report.

Used in this way, "we" may stand for a research organization, such as a testing laboratory. This usage is entirely acceptable. On the other hand, if the "we" refers to an individual author only, it would sound pompous and artificial.

In summary, the desire for scientific objectivity has led to avoidance of the kind of first-person writing seen in version one, and to the general use of the third-person passive voice represented in version two. The other versions are possibilities worth bearing in mind.

Further discussion of this topic may be found in Chapter 7, where certain more specialized problems are considered.

Impersonality of style, or objectivity of tone, is not altogether a matter of employing the third person or of using the passive voice, however. An undesirable tone can easily be manifested through any style. For instance, a writer might say: "There can be no doubt that this product is infinitely superior to all others on the market; as a matter of fact, the others are worse than useless—they are shoddily made and placed on the market, it would appear, by an entirely unscrupulous group of shysters." This sentence is written in the passive voice, without personal pronouns. But it is not objective in tone. A preferable version is this: "Product A is superior to all other products tested, as the data show."

So, in addition to leaving out those elements which are personal in a purely grammatical way, it is also necessary to exclude words and phrases of an emotional sort unwarranted by the subject matter. "Dignity" and "restraint" are the words ordinarily used to describe the tone desired.

Although personal pronouns will ordinarily have to be excluded in formal reports to maintain impersonality of style, they need not be avoided in informal letter reports and memoranda, where they are natural and appropriate. Phrases like "the author," or "the writer" are stilted in these circumstances.