Writing for an International Audience

As North American companies reach out to the global marketplace, they are encountering new communications challenges. In written correspondence, writers now have to simplify their English in order to produce effective business documents, including e-mail messages.

In this section, you will find some strategies for writing to people whose first language is not English.

Some tips for writing international English

Avoid wordy phrases
Most writers have a “library” of phrases that have become second nature to them. Some examples:

- at this point in time...
- located to the east of New York...
- in a timely manner...
- on an annualized basis...
- in accordance with...
- because of the fact that...
- subsequent to...
- despite the fact that...

While these writing habits are neither ungrammatical nor “wrong,” they can make the task of a non-native English speaker considerably more arduous.

Choose concise verbs
Out of sheer habit, many writers use drawn out verbs rather than their shorter, more concise alternatives. Some examples:

- We will carry out an analysis of... (We will analyze...)
- We are in agreement with... (We agree...)
- They conducted a review of... (They reviewed...)
Choose strong verbs
Writers faced with the challenge of describing complex processes sometimes retreat to the safety of weak verbs. Some examples:

- *Our engineers will involve your company’s specialists in the project.*  
  (What exactly does “involve” mean?)
- *Have the lever in a position that can be easily reached.*  
  (Position the lever within reach...)

Avoid verbalizing nouns
North Americans have a habit of turning nouns into verbs. This practice is confusing to someone who learned English as a foreign language and who learned many of these words as nouns. Some examples:

- *The downturn in Asian economies will impact our financial results.*  
  (influence?)
- *We will interface with your systems analysts weekly during the project.*  
  (meet with?)

While words like *impact* and *interface* are now accepted (at least by some dictionaries) as verbs in our language, writers should keep in mind that readers who learned English as a foreign language will have learned these words as nouns.

Similarly, using a word such as *address* can cause misunderstandings. Most students of English will first learn that an *address* goes on the outside of an envelope. Then in our business correspondence, we tell them that:

- *We will address their issues;*
- *Our representative will address them at their next staff meeting; and*
- *The issue of costs will be addressed during a one-to-one interface.*

Is it any wonder that someone on the other side of the world might be confused?
Minimize use of passive verbs
When people learn English, they start by learning straightforward sentence structures that have the following active structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The manager</td>
<td>wrote</td>
<td>the proposal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So when they first read a sentence with a passive structure, they have to stop and figure out who is doing what to whom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The proposal</td>
<td>was written</td>
<td>by the manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it is practically impossible to eliminate passive verbs completely from a large document, writers should at least try to minimize their use. The above examples are, of course, very simple. Try this one:

- *The initiation of the project and the acquisition of the necessary resources will be carried out by us.*

An alternative:

- *We will start the project and we will make sure that the necessary materials are available.*

Avoid using noun strings
People who learn English as a foreign language learn to recognize nouns and adjectives. They know that an adjective modifies a noun. However, sometimes we use a noun to modify another noun as in *mail truck, systems analyst* or *computer program*. Most foreign readers cope with this practice.

However, when we use multiple nouns to modify another noun, comprehension problems can arise. An example:

- *An organizational change readiness assessment will be conducted by our business transformation management team.*
Stay away from sports analogies and idioms

Every culture has its share of idioms. While these phrases add richness and color to our communications, they simply do not cross borders well. Not only can they confuse some readers, but sometimes they can also offend. Some examples:

- We’re in this for the long haul...
- This puts us between a rock and a hard spot...
- With our technology, you will be able to blast the competition...
- We need to change our game plan...
- Without new technology, you won’t even get to second base...

Balance brevity with comprehension

While all writers seek to achieve a style that is brief and to-the-point, for readers who learned English as a foreign language, a writer sometimes needs to add words in order to be more explicit.

- The word *that*
  
  Used as a conjunction between a primary and a subordinated sentence core, we often omit the word *that*.

  We heard *their bid* was successful.

  For foreign readers, however, the following structure would be more helpful.

  We heard **that** their bid was successful.

- The possessive
  
  The possessive apostrophe sometimes causes confusion for foreign readers.

  *Acme’s services lead to cost effective solutions for its clients’ challenges.*

  An alternative:

  At Acme, we provide cost effective solutions for the challenges that our clients face.
Use bridging words liberally
In their quest for conciseness, many writers in North America have been taught to omit bridging words or phrases. However, these words can be helpful to a reader who is struggling to follow the flow of meaning in a business document.

Some examples:

- **First**, we will analyze your situation; **second**, we will prepare a proposed plan of action; **and finally**, we will implement the new system.

- The project has been completed more quickly than we expected. **As a result**, you will receive the final report next week.

- Because the network has been expanded, we can extend the service to 20,000 additional customers. **Consequently**, you will achieve your financial goals for the following year.

Avoid vague sentence subjects
Vague words that carry no intrinsic meaning are problematic for readers who learned English as a foreign language. When used as the subject of a sentence core, the words **This**, **There** and **It** do little to clarify the meaning of the message.

Some examples:

- **This**

  *The stock market is becoming increasingly volatile. **This** means that investors must find other ways to invest their money.*

  (The vague *this* causes the reader to think backwards to the previous statement.)

  An alternative:

  *Because the stock market is becoming increasingly volatile, investors must find other ways to invest their money.*
• There

There are several solutions Acme can offer.

An alternative:

Acme can offer you several solutions.

• It

It is to be expected that subcontractors will cause delays.

(The it in this sentence conveys no meaning; it is simply a filler word.)

An alternative:

We can expect the subcontractors to cause delays.

Shorten your sentences

Sentences with more than two sentence cores put extra strain on the reading and translating abilities of foreign readers. While a multi-core sentence may be quite clear to a native English speaker, a reader who learned English as a foreign language may struggle not only to translate each word but to translate a sentence structure which may be very different from that used in their mother tongue.