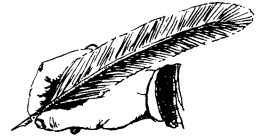


# Helpful Hints for Technical Writing

## Don't Write Ambiguously

Authors must be sure that the sentences they write have only one meaning. Ambiguity is very hard for authors to find in their own writing. They know exactly what they want to say, and other meanings are hard to notice. A good reviewer can catch ambiguous statements.



Individual words can have more than one meaning. For example, “fall” can be a verb or it can be a season of the year. Commonly, one word can be more than one part of speech. For example, “exposed” can be the past tense of the verb (The plants were exposed to herbicide vapors.) or an adjective (The exposed plant died.). Such words must be used carefully, so their intended meaning is always clear.

Entire statements can have two different meanings. The intended meaning can usually be discerned from the context, but the uncertainty can bother the reader. The first impression from “. . . by indexing cumulative cress (*Lepidium sativum*) seed germination” is that “cumulative cress” is the weed’s common name. When we read “Hydrilla roots in the hydrosol,” we don’t know whether “roots” is a noun or a verb, without reading further.

Sometimes the alternate meaning is ludicrous. Does a statement about a “common cold storage area” refer to a cold storage area that everyone can use or to a place to store the common cold? “Control of ragwort by pulling in the flowering stage” was intended to mean that the ragwort plants were pulled when they had flowers. But it also says that the plant can be controlled if the flowering stage is pulled in.

Long strings of modifiers lend themselves to ambiguity, especially if some of the modifiers are nouns used as adjectives. In “Relatively large light doses are required,” one wonders whether he is reading about doses of something that are large but not heavy or about large doses of light. “A bioassay technique based on growth of pregerminated corn roots” seems to refer to the impossible “corn roots that had germinated” rather than the intended “roots of seedlings from pregerminated corn seeds.”

Small differences in meaning of a single word can let a sentence have two meanings. When we read “Since tomato fields are frequently irrigated, summer annual weeds . . .,” we don’t know whether water is applied every few days to all the fields, or whether fields usually are irrigated, but not always.

Sometimes the flow of meaning in a sentence goes in two directions and remains ambiguous until a clarifying word is reached. An objective of USDA-ARS research was stated to be “Develop chemical technology to reduce crop yield and quality losses.” Until the last word is read, the perceived meaning could be radically different from that intended. The same problem is found in “Some suggestions are made as to how important sources of error can be avoided.” Although the meaning is clear when the whole sentence is read, the author should not write in a way that can disrupt smooth reading.

The reader must not be forced to decipher ambiguous statements. It is the author’s obligation to be sure that what is written has only one meaning.

Remember:

All statements in your manuscript,  
One meaning must convey.  
If a second meaning can be seen,  
Please correct without delay.

J. H. Dawson, U.S. Dep. Agric., ARS, Prosser, WA 99350