

# Helpful Hints for Technical Writing

## More Information Without More Words



A technical report should include only as many words as are needed to present information clearly. Words should be selected and sentences constructed so they deliver the maximum information possible.

Following are examples from technical literature where more information could have been presented without increasing the number of words used. In all the improved versions, words that add information are in italics.

As written (9 words): No emergence occurred from depths greater than 5 cm.

Better (9 words): No *seedlings* emerged from depths greater than 5 cm.

As written (6 words): Applicaton was made to several fields.

Better (6 words): *Metribuzin* was applied to several fields.

As written (8 words): If the application is made in the fall, . . .

Better (8 words): If the *herbicide* is applied in the fall, . . .

As written (8 words): Incorporation into soil is done with a harrow.

Better (8 words): *Herbicides* are incorporated into soil with a harrow.

As written (6 words): Trifluralin provided control for 7 weeks.

Better (6 words): Trifluralin controlled *barnyardgrass* for 7 weeks.

As written (4 words): Pronamide gave complete control.

Better (4 words): Pronamide controlled *quackgrass* completely.

As written (3 words): Treatments were made.

Better (3 words): *Fields* were treated.

As written (6 words): The toxin did not cause death.

Better (6 words): The toxin did not kill *rats*.

As written (5 words): Deaths occur from microbial contamination.

Better (5 words): *Livestock* die from microbial contamination.

(4 words): Microbial contamination kills *livestock*.

As written (7 words): Electrolyte leakage was detected within one hour.

Better (7 words): Electrolyte leaked from *cytoplasm* within one hour.

As written (7 words): Growth was inhibited after germination had occurred.

Better (7 words): *Herbicides* inhibited growth after *seeds* had germinated.

As written (7 words): When temperatures reach 20 C, germination can occur.

Better (7 words): When temperatures reach 20 C, *seeds* can germinate.

As written (5 words): Dinoseb showed the greatest effectiveness.

Better (4 words): Dinoseb *defoliated plants* best.

As written (8 words): Chemicals have little time to exert their effectiveness.

Better (7 words): Chemicals have little time to *control pests*.

In the original versions, drab verbs (e.g., "occur," "give," "make," "show," "do," and "provide") abound, and descriptive verbs have been changed to nouns (e.g., "emergence" formed from "emerge"). In the improved versions, drab verbs have been eliminated, and forceful verbs have replaced the nouns derived from them. In all cases, an informative noun has been added. In the last two examples, an informative verb was added, as well, and the number of words required was reduced besides.

Remember:

When words we use do not convey

Their share of information

Revision should subject such words

To prompt elimination.

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