Mean What You Write and Write What You Mean

Technical writing must be accurate. When writing, the author knows what he means and what he wants to say. He knows it so well that he may not notice that what he writes may actually say something different.

Consider this sentence.

Seeds planted 1 cm deep emerged in 4 days; those planted 2 cm deep emerged in 6 days; and those planted 4 cm deep did not emerge at all.

The sentence is incorrect because seeds do not emerge; seedlings do. Following is one way to write the sentence correctly:

Seedlings emerged after 4 and 6 days from seeds planted 1 and 2 cm deep, respectively. None emerged from seeds planted 4 cm deep.

Here is another incorrect statement:

Application of sethoxydim 4 weeks after seeding alfalfa controlled volunteer wheat without injuring alfalfa seedings.

"Application" is the process of distributing the herbicide in the alfalfa field. The herbicide, not its application, killed the weeks. This sentence can be made technically accurate as follows:

Application of sethoxydim 4 weeks after seeding resulted in the control of volunteer wheat without injury to alfalfa seedlings.

Although accurate, this sentence is undesirable because it is indirect, wordy, and weakened because verbs have been changed to nouns. The following revision is better because it is accurate, direct, and concise:

When applied 4 weeks after seeding alfalfa, sethoxydim controlled volunteer wheat and did not injure alfalfa seedlings.

Another example:

The seeds of kochia are cross-pollinated.

This sentence is incorrect because seeds are not pollinated; flowers are. The sentence should be written to reflect this fact. One way would be:

Seeds of kochia develop from cross-pollinated flowers.

The so-called "dangling participle" can make sentences ambiguous because the term that the participial phrase modifies is not clear. For example:

After applying the herbicide, the leaves remained green and appeared normal for ten days.

This sentence really says that the leaves applied the herbicides. Rewriting as follows corrects the problem:

The leaves remained green and appeared normal for ten days after the herbicide had been applied.

Remember:

If in what we write,
Clear meaning can be seen;
Then we have used words
That say just what we mean.

J. H. Dawson, Weed Scientist, Prosser, WA 99350