



**ENGINEERING  
PROGRAM IN TECHNICAL  
COMMUNICATION**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

# “Help Us To See It”

## Five ways to accommodate readers

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# “Help Us To See It”

## Five Ways to Accommodate Readers

Writers easily fail to realize that the material they have been working on for some time (days, weeks, months) and is familiar to them may not be familiar to readers who may be seeing the content for the first time.

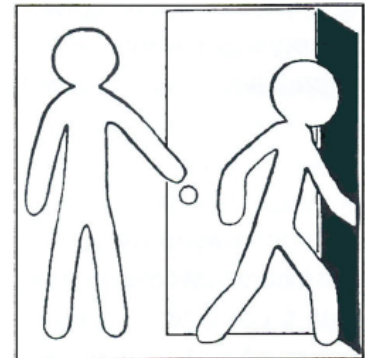
Readers may rightfully say, “You’ve been working on this content for weeks and I’m encountering it for the first time. Help me to see now in these minutes what you’ve been seeing for a long time.” In other words, “Compress and arrange what has taken a long time to content I can grasp in a short time.”

This guide highlights five ways that writers can help readers understand content:

1. descriptive headings
2. definitions
3. examples
4. analogies
5. commentary.

The sample text below contains these five ways: it is taken from an article in the magazine *Scientific American*. Its articles skillfully accommodate scientific and technical content to educated readers.

Each of the five ways is **highlighted in red**, with comments at right.



Helping readers through the text; acts of consideration for others, such as holding open a door. These acts reveal an awareness of others and take extra effort.

from “Edge of the Internet”  
by Larry Greenemeier  
*Scientific American* (June 2013), 308,  
82-86

### What makes “information networking” different from today’s Internet?

Many people refer to the Internet as a “dumb” network, although I don’t like that term. What drove the Internet initially was non-real-time sharing of documents and data. The system’s biggest requirement was resiliency—it had to be able to continue operating even if one or more nodes [computers, servers, and so on] stopped functioning. And the network was designed to see data simply as digital traffic, not to interpret the significance of those data.

Descriptive heading. Helps readers more clearly identify textual content, especially when scanning the document.

Much better than common, vague headings such as “Introduction,” or here, “Information Networking.”

A good descriptive heading can often make a claim or an assertion that the section content then must support.

Definition #1. The term “resiliency” has many context-specific meanings, one provided here.

Definition #2. Same context-specific meaning for “nodes” as provided here.

Today we use the Internet in ways that require real-time performance, whether that is watching streaming video or making phone calls. At the same time, we’re generating much

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more data. The network has to become more aware of the information it's carrying so it can better prioritize delivery and operate more efficiently. For example, if I'm doing a video conference in my office and turn my head away from the screen to chat with someone who has just entered my office, the conference setup should know to stop transmitting video until my attention returns to the screen. The system would recognize that I am no longer paying attention and not waste bandwidth while I'm speaking with the person in my office.

Commentary. Explaining the importance of the previous two sentences.

An example for clarity. Providing examples takes extra effort and reveals that the author senses that readers may need help.

### **How do you make a network more aware of the information it's carrying?**

Descriptive heading.

There are different approaches. If you want to know more about the data crossing a network—for example, to send a user's request for a Web page to the closest Web server—then you use software to peek into the data packet, something called deep-packet inspection. Think of a physical letter you send through the normal postal service wrapped in an envelope with an address on it. The postal service doesn't care what the letter says; it's only interested in the address. This is how the Internet functions today with regard to data. With deep-packet inspection, software tells the network to open the data envelope and read at least part of what's inside. But you can get only a limited amount of information about the data this way, and it requires a lot of processing power. Plus, if the data inside the packet are encrypted, deep-packet inspection won't work.

Example.

Analogy

Commentary

These five ways—descriptive headings, definitions, examples, analogies, and commentary—require extra effort from writers, but the extra effort helps readers who can now see as the writers intend.