



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

# Other Matters of Textual Style

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# Other Matters of Textual Style

## 1. *Issue v. Problem*

Do not euphemize *problem* into *issue*, as states the current style guide for preparing articles in the IEEE format.

An issue has at least two sides, with arguments for and against. For example, an issue can be whether taxes should be raised to support improved road maintenance.

The term “problem” means something is wrong and must be fixed.

## 2. In America, the period and comma are placed inside the close-quotation marks.

“The punctuation would look like this example,” not like this”.

## 3. Follow the demonstrative pronoun *this* with a noun for clarity.

Sometimes the referent of *this* is ambiguous if more than one referent precedes the *this*.

Example:

The large copper sphere showed non-ideal behavior and caused significant noise in our measured data, which then affected our ability to compare these results to the results of Kamman et al. **This** may be caused in part by . .

(Does *this* refer to non-ideal behavior or noise or inability to compare?)

Better:

The large copper sphere showed non-ideal behavior and caused significant noise in our measured data, which then affected our ability to compare these results to the results of Kamman et al. **This inability** to compare these results may be caused in part by . . .”

## 4. The word *data* is plural; *datum* is singular.

The word *criteria* is plural; *criterion* is singular.

NO: We must fix this issue in the suspension system before production begins.

YES: We must fix this problem in the suspension system before production begins.

YES: Our lab will address the issue of whether six or 12 welding machines are needed.

“These data reveal . . .”

“Our data are not yet conclusive to support . . .”

5. “Is able to” (wordy) can often be replaced with “can.”

Example:

The result is able to be used to clarify the recommendation.

Better:

The result can be used to clarify the recommendation.

6. Font choice: Serifed (Times New Roman) or sans-serifed (Arial)?

Use a sans-serifed font such as Arial for short blocks of text, such as titles, headings, and subheadings.

Use a serifed font such as Times New Roman for long blocks of text, such as the paragraphs of the body text.

Example:

**Nullam cursus egestas**

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec varius tincidunt lacinia. Fusce sed turpis at tellus aliquam rhoncus at sit amet arcu. Nam vulputate id dui at sagittis. Nam dignissim enim sit amet feugiat rhoncus. Class aptent taciti sociosqu ad litora torquent per conubia nostra, per inceptos himenaeos. Vestibulum ut elementum arcu, ut vehicula neque.

sans-serifed font  
for the heading

serifed font for  
the body text

7. Companies and businesses are singular and take a singular pronoun.

No: Clark Industries requested their proposal be amended before next week.

Yes: Clark Industries requested its proposal be amended before next week.

Yes: The management at Clark Industries requested its proposal be amended before next week.

Yes: Managers at Clark Industries requested their proposal be amended before next week.

Would you write, “Clark Industries are a good place to work”?

“Ford Motor Company are a good place to work”?

**8. *Between* or *Among*?**

Often confused. Use *between* for two things, *among* for more than two.

Examples:

The committee had a hard time choosing among the applicants.  
(*more than two applied*).

The committee had a hard time choosing between the applicants.  
(*only two applicants applied*).

**9. Whether or not.** The *or not* is implied in *whether*; it can almost always be cut.

She was not sure whether the solution indeed completely covered the surface.

**10. *Basically***—can almost always be cut because it’s a filler word.

Examples:

NO: These results basically show our work for the past three months.

YES: These results show our work for the past three months.

**11. Dangling modifiers.**

The subject of a modifier must agree with the topic of the sentence. If not, the modifier dangles.

Examples:

NO: Rushing to complete the experiment, Sarah’s instrument produced incorrect data.

(In this sentence, the instrument was not rushing, Sarah was).

YES: As Sarah rushed to complete the experiment, she discovered that her instrument produced incorrect data.

**12. *Use* instead of *utilize***

From *The Handbook of Technical Communication* (Alfred, Brusaw, & Oliu. 10e) and nearly all other handbooks:

Do not use *utilize* as a long variant of *use*, which is the general word for “employ for some purpose.” *Use* will almost always be clearer and less pretentious (569).

Why use three syllables to write what can be written with one syllable?

### 13. That, Which

*That* introduces a restrictive clause (limits the meaning of the noun it modifies and is thus necessary for identification); *which* introduces a non-restrictive clause, which adds extra information not necessary to the meaning of the noun.

Use *that* to introduce a restrictive clause. Example: Industries that diversify usually succeed.

Use *which*, followed by a comma, to introduce a non-restrictive clause. Example: The calorimeter, which was installed just yesterday, allows our lab to accurately measure fuel-energy values.

In this example, commas belong at both ends of the non-restrictive clause.