Lecture 34
How to Avoid Common Writing Problems

Lecture Outline:
• Writer’s Block
• Lack of a Well-Defined Purpose
• Poorly Analyzed Structure
• Lack of Coincidence
• Organizational problems
• Punctuation problems
• Readability problems
• Writing Style Problems
• Organizational logic
• Mechanical development of the topic
• Writer’s style
• Quality of the manuscript

Writer’s Block:
Writer’s block is what we call the experience of getting stuck while writing. Although the results are the same, there are many sources of writer’s block: lack of information, lack of a well defined purpose, poor knowledge of the audience, lack of confidence.

Lack of Information:
If it is the result of poor research, then you will have to stop writing and do more information gathering. If you find yourself doing this often, you might correctly guess that you have a problem in defining your communication purpose.

Lack of a Well-Defined Purpose:
A poorly defined purpose of your communication will inevitably make writing more difficult, and may block it altogether. Sometimes you will experience this as a lack of information; often you will notice it as paragraphs, sections, or entire reports or papers that shift topic in the middle. For any case of poorly defined purpose, the solution is the same. Develop a three-part purpose statement for the communication, and develop an outline of topics sentences based on the purpose statements.

Poorly Analyzed Audience:
Audience analysis that is performed poorly or not at all can be the source of writer’s block. At such times you find yourself staring at the video display screen wondering who is going to read your report and what on earth they want from it.

Lack of Confidence:
A lack of confidence in your abilities as a writer is a common source of writer’s block, and it is usually self-fulfilling. If you do not think you can communicate effectively, you will not be able to practice your systematic approaches of writing problems is the solution to this problem.

Organizational Problems:
Organizational problems are discovered during the editing phase. Finding and fixing these problems is what makes editing important. If they are not fixed, readers experience organization problems as complete breakdowns in communication.

Punctuation Problems:
Accurate punctuation does not ensure accurate communication, but accurate communication is tremendously enhanced by accurate punctuation. Take the following punctuation test, without first looking at the correct version which follows, to see how well you know punctuation. The test focuses on the most common punctuation problems in technical writing.
Readability Problems:
Readability is a buzz word with which most of us are familiar. Much has been said about it, and there are numerous formulas which supposedly test it. Readability is the likelihood that a project audience will be able to read and comprehend a piece of documentation.

Gunning’s Fog Index:
This is a simple formula aimed at locating the audience on a grade scale which is supposedly based on their reading abilities.

- Select a part of the text which is approximately 100 words long, to the nearest period. Introductions, leads, and conclusions usually exhibit slightly different communication techniques which will skew the accuracy of this test.
- Count the number of sentences in the selected text.
- Determine the average length of sentences by dividing the number of words in the text by the number of sentences.
- Count the number of words which have three or more syllables. But do not count words which are capitalized, words which have three syllables because prefixes or suffixes have been added, or words which are combinations of one- or two-syllable words.
- Add the number for the average sentence length to the number of three-syllable words in the text.
- Multiply this sum by .04.
- The result is the Fog Index. If you place it on a scale of 1-20, you will be able to have the approximate reading level required to understand the text.

Writing Style Problems:
Style is a result of sentence structure. Although you might not think so, sentence structure is simple and easy to understand. There are four basic types of sentences:

Subject-verb sentences (SV)
Example:
The programmer (S) quit (V).

Subject-verb-object sentences (SVO)
Example:
The programmer (S) kicked the terminal (O)

–Subject-linking verb – complement sentence (SLVC)
Example:
The programmer (S) felt (LV) sick (C)

–Subject-verb-indirect object – object (SVIO)
Example:
The programmer (S) gave (V) the engineer (IO) a headache (O).

How to Edit Your Work:
His lecture will present some ways that writers can assess the quality of their work and the work of others. Good editing divides the task of improving a document into a limited number of areas
1. Organizational logic
2. Mechanical development of the topic
3. Writer’s style
4. Quality of the manuscript

Organizational Logic:

Mechanical Development of the Topic:
Look to see if there is transition between paragraphs, even between sentences. Transition is what links the ideas together. Transition can be accomplished in three ways:
1. The writer might repeat an important word in two adjoining paragraphs or sentences.
2. Structure can accomplish transition.
3. Transitional words and phrases can be used to establish links between ideas in an obvious way, such as “Finally”

Writer’s Style:
If you wish to sell an idea or a product, then the style must be persuasive. If you wish to convey information only, such as in a report to superiors, then the style should appear to be passively objective.

Quality of the Manuscript
The last thing a writer needs to examine when editing a document is the quality of the manuscript. A manuscript should be visually attractive. This means that it should be orderly, that there should be obvious divisions and subdivisions. A manuscript should invite readership. Have you ever seen a report or paper which had writing crowded out to the edges of the paper from top to bottom and side to side? Such a manuscript looks hard to read.

The type should be clear in a manuscript, and the production should not be sloppy. A report or paper must be sufficiently detailed. Only the writer knows how much detail is sufficient. There should be enough detail, though, to satisfy the projected readers’ needs for information. If the writer has paid attention to logical organization and development of the topic, the document will be detailed and as short as it has to be. After this, the document must be proofread, which should not be confused with editing. While editing requires being judgmental, proofreading is a quick checking for errors.