



**The Scientific
Style for
Today's
Nonscientific
Readers**

**GOOD, BAD, OR IN-BETWEEN,
THE SCIENTIFIC STYLE IS, BY
DEFINITION, WRITTEN BY
SCIENTISTS
FOR
SCIENTISTS**

**ARE YOU A
SCIENTIST?**

ARE YOUR CLIENT REPRESENTATIVES SCIENTISTS?

English is a complex language.

WHICH IS MADE EVEN MORE COMPLEX BY THINGS LIKE...

WORDS THAT HAVE OPPOSITE MEANINGS.

The community sanctioned Larry by giving him a professional engineer's license.

The community sanctioned Larry by revoking his professional engineer's license.

The team offered Coach Mudflap a new contract before the start of his last year. But it was a lousy year. Coach M didn't know whether to resign or resign.

Performing oversight is essential, because that's the best way to catch an oversight.

English is a complex language.

WHICH MAKES IT EVEN MORE COMPLEX BY THINGS LIKE...

**English is a
complex language.**

HETERONYMS

**Words that are spelled the same,
but are pronounced differently and
have discrete meanings.**

**English is a
complex language.**

**WHICH IS MADE EVEN
MORE COMPLEX BY
THINGS LIKE...
HAZARDOUS
HOMOPHONES**

**English is a
complex language.
WHICH IS MADE EVEN
MORE COMPLEX BY
THINGS LIKE...**

**SLIPSHOD
SYNONYMS**

Complexity breeds ambiguity.

1. If a claim arises on a project, it will probably arise:

- a. while the project is ongoing.
- b. within six months of project completion.
- c. within one year of project completion.
- d. more than one year after project completion.

2. At that time, the most compelling evidence about the project will be:

- a. in writing.
- b. the testimony of eyewitnesses.
- c. the testimony of experts.
- d. long-gone.

3. Most of the parties to a construction or environmental project can evade liability. Which of the following statements describing how is untrue:

- a. Government entities may declare sovereign immunity.
- b. Private owners may dissolve their corporate status.
- c. Contractors and subcontractors may dissolve their corporate status.
- d. Professionals ask the tooth fairy.

4. Juries often decide issues based on emotions or "gut reactions," and then look for "facts" to back them up. True or False?

Professionals are personally liable and so may be the only parties available to pay damages when a problem arises. A trier of fact – a judge or jury – may resolve the matter based upon something in writing that has little or nothing to do with the matters at issue.

Opposing counsel will allege that your ambiguous writing – remember, what’s in writing is always the “best evidence” – misled others, or that the carelessness or lack of professionalism evident in your writing is indicative of...

the carelessness or lack of professionalism in all your technical activities.

Given the complexities of your language, many of which you may not be familiar with, you need to make your writing as uncomplex as possible, so you can say exactly what you mean to say, with the least ambiguity possible.

THAT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO DO BECAUSE OF COMPLEX, STANDARDIZED STYLES

IT'S NOT JUST JARGON. SOME PROFESSIONS, INCLUDING YOURS, HAVE DEVELOPED THEIR OWN "STYLES" THAT PRACTITIONERS USE TO COMMUNICATE WITH ONE ANOTHER AND, IN THE PROCESS, CONVINCED THEMSELVES THAT THEIR TRULY DREADFUL WRITING ACTUALLY IS GOOD WRITING.

The Academic Style

It is imperative for you to observe Richard as he engages in the physical activity of using uniquely personal means to traverse the terrain at a rate of speed in excess of that customarily employed.^{1, 6, 9}

See Dick run.

See Dick run.

The Legal Style (a.k.a., Legalese)

If attorneys were good writers, they wouldn't have to go into court (at their clients' expense!) to determine the meaning of what they wrote (at their clients' expense!).

**The Legal Style
(a.k.a., Legalese)**

fullest extent



**The Scientific Style
(a.k.a., Yuck)**

Enter the Passive,
Voice of the Dead.

ACTIVE VOICE
Subject Verb Object

ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

vs.

PASSIVE VOICE

ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

vs.

PASSIVE VOICE

Object Verb

ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

VS.

PASSIVE VOICE

A gift was sent.

ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

VS.

PASSIVE VOICE

A gift was sent.

Object Verb



ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

VS.

PASSIVE VOICE

Object Verb Preposition Subject

ACTIVE VOICE

Jeffrey sent a gift.

Subject Verb Object

vs.

PASSIVE VOICE

A gift was sent by Jeffrey.

Object Verb Prep. Object/Subject

**IN THE PASSIVE
WORLD, PEOPLE DON'T
DO THINGS.
THINGS JUST HAPPEN.
THE PASSIVE VOICE
DELETES PEOPLE.**

ACTIVE VOICE

John hit the ball.

Subject Verb Object

vs.

PASSIVE VOICE

The ball was hit.

Object Verb



Subject

ACTIVE VOICE

John hit the ball.

Subject Verb Object

vs.

PASSIVE VOICE

The ball was hit by John.

Object Verb Prep. Object/Subject

**We do not think in the
passive voice.**



**We do not talk in the
passive voice.**

**THAT'S
UNNATURAL!
AND
EXTRAORDINARILY
BORING**

The passive voice:

- uses more words (creating more complexity and opportunities for errors),
- is awkward,
- leads to omission of important information,
- encourages incomplete reporting, and
- increases the risk of ambiguity and misunderstanding.

**But all of us technical
professionals have
always written that way.**



The "scientific style" is a 150-year-old hand-me-down that is unfit for use in today's far more complex, far less forgiving practice environment.

Get better! Write without the passive voice.

The evaluation was conducted and, based on the evaluation, recommendations were developed, as follows:

We evaluated the situation and recommend:

The ABC team evaluated the situation and recommends:

The evaluation revealed conditions that can be improved by implementing the following recommendations:

BUT

**Proposals cannot offer.
Reports cannot describe.
Letters cannot confirm.
Memos cannot announce.**

**Proposals, reports, letters,
and memos are
instruments or media
people use to communicate
with other people.**

**People offer.
People describe.
People confirm.
People announce.**

**Is something wrong
with people?**

**What do you call a
geoprofessional firm that
has no people?**

NOTHING!

**You are a technical professional
person in the geoprofessional
segment of the service industry who
is attempting to communicate
clearly and unambiguously to client-
representative persons,
constructor-representative persons,
government-representative persons,
and other people in
2012, not 1870.**

**Believe it or not, some
geoprofessionals actually
believe that eliminating people
from their writing,
principally by using the
passive voice, is an
important risk-management
practice.**

**That is
100% wrong
and
180° from reality.**



**GET INTO THE HABIT OF
WRITING SIMPLE, ACTIVE-
VOICE, DECLARATIVE
SENTENCES.**

**DO THAT BY REVISING
THINGS YOU'VE ALREADY
WRITTEN: PROPOSALS,
REPORTS, ADVISORIES...
WHATEVER!**

**FIND THE VERB AND
DETERMINE WHO OR WHAT
IS TAKING ACTION, THEN
APPLY BASIC SENTENCE
STRUCTURE.**

The decision was made.
[Someone] made the decision.

By converting to the active voice, you often can use a more effective verb.

[Someone] decided.

Suppose your client representative insists that you use the passive voice?

Tell the client representative...

"Hell must be gone to by you!"


