

Writing Tip of the Day

Dr. Robert Mitchell

Examples of Writing Tips - Spring 2008

1. Audience is very important to successful technical writing. For the writing projects in this course assume your audience is me or your job supervisor who has an understanding of the science of hydrology and related jargon.
2. Organize your thoughts by linking information in the sections. For example, read your Results; do the results that you summarize connect to the objectives listed in the Introduction and the procedures in the Methods section? Do the points you address in the Discussion link back to the objectives mentioned in the Introduction?
3. Modularize your thoughts into paragraphs that focus on an idea. Put the main point first (i.e., the topic sentence); don't develop a detective story and put the main idea last. The sentences in the paragraph should relate to the topic. Keep the paragraph short (6 to 8 lines). If the idea requires more discussion, break it into more paragraphs.
4. Just like you start a paragraph with a topic sentence, start your Discussion with an opening theme. The theme will drive the direction and organization of the Discussion. The theme should directly relate back to the main objective of the project.
5. Place the main point at or near the beginning of a sentence, i.e., avoid lengthy introductory phrases or clauses at the beginning of a sentence. The active voice will shorten sentences.
6. You "alone" are the author. As such, use "I" as the subject performing the action (i.e., active voice). Only use "we" when there are multiple authors. Do not use the phrase "the class." For example, "The class was told to analyze precipitation data."
7. All numbers that begin a sentence should be spelled out.
8. Figures, Tables and Methods don't perform actions. Don't write "The Thiessen method calculated 45 inches." You should write "The Thiessen method result is 45 inches." Or, "I calculated an average of 45 inches using the Thiessen method."
9. Data is the plural form of datum. As such, write "Weather data were collected." Not "Weather data was collected." Or, "The data indicate that rainfall intensities are generally low in the watershed." Not, "The data indicates that rainfall intensities are generally low in the watershed."
10. Affect and effect are two words that cause much confusion. Affect with an "a" is a verb meaning "to influence." Effect with an "e" is a noun meaning "result." The relief in the watershed greatly affected the rainfall distribution. One effect of a high relative humidity is a reduction in evaporation.
11. Do you use "a" or "an" before an acronym? If the acronym is used as a word, such as NOAA, then use the article that would be associated with the word (e.g., "a" NOAA scientist). Otherwise, use the article that would be associated with the first letter of the acronym (e.g., "an" AET method was used to estimate the evapotranspiration).