

## Don't Be a Writer's Writer

### Introduction

In the performing arts there's always a great cachet to be had in being known as a *musician's musician* or an *actor's actor*.

An architect friend of mine always refers (reverentially) to Le Corbusier as an *architect's architect*. Those of you lucky enough to do Eng Lit at university perhaps heard Joyce or Pinchon called a *writer's writer*. There's a wonderful sort of pride and snobbery in being referred to in those terms, with the implication that the work is too complex or avant garde to be fully understood or appreciated by the plebs.

Recently I've been thinking that some technical writers, at least sub-consciously, share this conceit, and wonder if it's a good thing. At best it's a distraction, at worst it can add cost and complexity to what is often a surprisingly difficult job.

Brass tacks – what am I talking about? Something that comes to mind is unnecessary complexity in style guides. I'm sure most of us with a few years experience have come across this phenomenon at least once. It's Day One, Year Zero of a new writing job, wisps of steam rise from the coffee cups and the manager supplies you with a hefty printed *Style Guide*, or worse, attempts to explain the standards verbally (you get writers cramp taking notes).

It goes something like this:

*Use a Header 1 for all chapter headings, unless the document is also going on-line in which case use Header 1 L. If the document is for translation use Header 1 LT, because the German titles are so long that a smaller font is necessary. Use Header 2 and 3 for both printed and online documents, unless you're writing an instruction manual, in which case use Header 2A and 2B. Clear?*

You learn there are a further six levels of header for various situations, and at least three separate styles of bulleted list, not to mention the numbered lists. There are naturally differences between *Warnings*, *Notes*, and *Cautions*, and precise instructions for the use of each. Blah blah blah, on it goes for another 20, 30, maybe 60 pages. Personally I've never come across a style guide that reached the magical ton yet, but I'm sure it's out there somewhere.

Now there's no doubt that a hell of a lot of work goes into formulating, writing and maintaining such standards, and very often the senior or long term writers in the team are proud of the way they really know the rules. Some of them may be so expert that they almost get it right first draft. Almost. Given six months to year or two of trial and error (lots of error) and you too may share this exulted summit with them. Strangely such guides often barely mention the things that scientific experiments prove to aid comprehension. Boring everyday stuff like *use the active voice*, and *keep your sentence length down*.

A digression. Long ago and far away, I spent the best part of three years drowsing through an under-graduate psychology course. But one of the few topics that had me bolt upright and taking detailed notes was the fascinating subject of human error.

It helped that our professor was an acknowledged world expert in the field, and a great deal of what he had to say was on the subject of aircraft crashes. This wasn't the psychology of white mice pushing levers and running through mazes, this was practical life and death stuff.

Amongst other things, we learned that a really good way to produce human errors is to have a lot of similar looking things with different uses. Older aircraft cockpits had rows of switches and dials all the same size and shape, arranged neatly right next to each other.

Even highly trained conscientious pilots invariably pressed the wrong switch on occasions and worse, were unaware they'd done so. Awareness sometimes came too late when the remaining fuel in tank two ran out, to be replaced by the air in tank one, rather than the 200 gallons in tank three. Gosh that course was fun!

### **What am I trying to say?**

Well, if you sat down and really thought things over, and applied yourself diligently to the task of designing a system that produces lots and lots of human errors, you'd might well come up with something like a 60 or 70 page style guide with six or more levels of header and six different types of list each for use in slightly different situations.

Why is this phenomenon so common, and what can we do to avoid it? Despite graduating, I never became a psychologist, so what follows is guess work. As always, the disease is more interesting than the cure, so first lets speculate as to why this weird complexity occurs and why it's so common.

**Legacy** – Technical writing has been around for quite a while now, and it's human nature to improve upon any existing system. Someone has a little problem and devises a rather neat solution with a new style. The style gets used a few times that week, a few times more the next, and suddenly there it is, a useful addition to the guide. Repeat the process with different writers and different projects and suddenly one Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, you notice your style guide is longer than the manual it 'helps' you to write.

**Control and Ego** – We tech writers can be an insecure bunch in this age of off-shoring and downsizing and mergers. I doubt it's fully conscious (we're nice people, honest) but the fact remains that having a complex way of working is a powerful way of declaring to the project manager that; *This is our turf. This is our speciality. You could never just jump in here and write a manual. And nor could anyone else, especially abroad, no matter how cost effective that might appear. The SMEs have their expertise, and we have ours!*

**Time** – Most projects run late, and technical writing teams often have to ‘tread water’ while the developers and designers struggle with the fact that they’ve bitten off more than they can chew (again, you observe smugly). Having things like a complex style sheet means you too can take your time, because each draft must be thoroughly checked by one or more members of the team before you can even think of releasing it.

**Control** (Part 2) – One of the depressing facts of life is that projects aren’t run for the benefit of the technical writing team. Goals change, new features are dreamt up, others are forgotten or removed (the writers are generally the last people to know). It’s a great psychological comfort to have control over at least one aspect of the work.

No doubt there are other reasons, some innocent, others maybe less so. None the less, it’s my belief that complexity, and *writing for other writers* is a bad thing, one that diverts precious energy into what should be a secondary process of making the work look good. The primary focus must always be on accuracy, and answering difficult questions like “*Does the user really need to know this?*”

### **The solution?**

It’s simple and yet hard. You need to step back and take a long cool look at just what you and the team are doing each day. An especially good time to think about this is when a new writer joins your team, and you can get a chance to see how they get up to speed, and how a fresh pair of eyes reacts to what you’re doing.

Failing that, why not spend a small amount of money and get an external consultant in to observe and report on the way you’re working? There’s no law that says you have to agree with her observations, or implement all or even many of her suggestions. But always remember if we’re true to ourselves and to our profession, we’re writing for the user, not to impress ourselves or even our managers. If we do a good job, the impressing side of things will be automatic.

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