Technical Documentation series

How Important is Proper Grammar in Technical Documentation?

Contents

A Whitepaper
by

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What is Meant by "Proper Grammar"?

Language scholars define grammar in various ways. For the purposes of this whitepaper, when referring to grammar, I am including[1]:

Syntax

Syntax means arrangement. The syntax of a language is the way its words are put together to form sentences.

Morphology

Morphology means the study of shape or form. In grammar, it refers to the way the words themselves are constructed, for example, adding prefixes and suffixes.

Punctuation

Punctuation covers how to use the marks in writing (such as commas, full stops, and question marks) that we call punctuation or punctuation marks. Punctuation is used to make sure your writing is clear.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is a word used in different ways. Your vocabulary is all the words you know. The vocabulary of a language is all the words in it. The vocabulary of a subject is all the words used when discussing it.

Style

The style of your writing is the general way you present your ideas.

Usage

Usage is about the way words are used in practice. While syntax is about rules, usage is about conventions.

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[1] *ABC Study Guide* at www.mdx.ac.uk/www/study/homepage ©Andrew Roberts

Does it Really Matter?

> **"As long as the meaning can be understood, is it necessary to follow the established conventions of English grammar when writing technical documentation?"**

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a word are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is that frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe.

As long as the meaning can be understood, is it necessary to follow the established conventions of English grammar when writing technical documentation? Is this an exercise in overkill? Well, yes and no.

When grammar should be secondary

- **When it interferes with communication**

  Grammatically correct: "That is something up with I will not put!"

  Grammatically incorrect, but more understandable: "*That is something I will not put up with!*"

- **When it hampers usability**

- **When it adds no value and is more costly to achieve**

When grammar should prevail

When we speak, we have cues to help the listener understand what we mean. We rely on body language, gestures, and the tone of our voice to help us communicate verbally. When writing, we do not have these tools at our disposal, so the same message may not be as clear in written form. Consequently, when writing, we need markers such as punctuation, spelling, and established conventions of English grammar to be most clearly understood.

Does it Really Matter? (cont'd)

When grammar should prevail (cont'd)

Proper grammar rules should <u>always</u> apply in the case of:

- **Spelling**

    It is never acceptable to write, "Be careful, so you don't loose you're balance." Even though the meaning is still clear, it is no more work to write it correctly. Doing otherwise shows either ignorance of basic grammar or laziness. (Hopefully, you knew that "loose" and "you're" were the misspelled words in that sentence.)

- **Apostrophe usage**

    Apostrophes have only two possible functions:

    1) To form a contraction. (e.g., *cannot* becomes *can't*, *you are* becomes *you're*)

    2) To make a noun or pronoun possessive. (e.g., *the paw of the dog* becomes *the dog's paw*, *the hat belonging to Charles* becomes *Charles's hat*)

    An apostrophe should never be used to make a noun or pronoun plural!

    1) **Wrong**: All visitor's must stand in line.

    2) **Correct**: All visitors must stand in line.

    3) **Wrong**: I grew up in the 1950's.

    4) **Correct**: I grew up in the 1950s.

- **Correct word usage**

    Correct word usage is closely akin to correct spelling. After all, if you write *loose* when you meant *lose*, is it because you didn't know the proper word or that you misspelled *lose*? Whatever the reason, there is no excuse for it in technical documentation.

Technical Writers are Grammar Experts

> *"…an experienced technical writer can produce quality documentation in less time than it takes another person to produce lesser quality documentation."*

Why risk using anyone else?

Technical writers who have been formally trained in the field are lifelong students of the English language. So, if a technical writer were available to perform the documentation, why would it make sense to have someone else perform the role?

While it is true that grammar may or may not hinder the overall objective of the technical documentation, why settle for lower quality output when high quality demands no more effort? In fact, research has shown that, on average, an experienced technical writer can produce quality documentation in less time than it takes another person to produce lesser quality documentation.

A Matter of Credibility

> *"Although poor grammar may not count against you, it most assuredly, will never count in your favor."*

You are judged by your work

It is true that users seldom complain about poor grammar within their documentation, but sooner or later, it will become a factor in your credibility. Whether it is fair or not, people and companies are judged in some capacity by their expertise in the written language. Although poor grammar may not count against you, it most assuredly, will never count in your favor.

Has this ever happened to you?

You receive an unsolicited e-mail that pretends to be a reputable vendor, but in fact, is an imposter (a.k.a. "Phishing")? They attempt to lure you in with an official-looking logo and colorful layout.

Grammar matters

What is the detail that usually gives them away? That's right! -- the typo, improper syntax, misspelling, or misused word in their text. You know that a reputable business would not let themselves be represented by less than excellent grammar. We have come to expect professionals to place a high priority on the quality of their written word. Grammar matters.