

**Course Code: GEC 324**

**Course Title: Technical Communication**

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

A young graduate's career when he joins a company and starts at or near the bottom of the professional ladder within a business organization is likely to follow a certain general pattern. He is more or less an errand boy as he is sent by his immediate supervisor to do a number of things and report. The pupil engineer or architect, for example, is asked to check drawings, make some calculations and collect some data from the field, the laboratory, or other establishments.

After these period of pupillage, the young professional would begin to get into some design and analysis and some report writing. It varies with individuals depending on their levels of intelligence, industry and initiatives. Those who are incapable of communicating their work effectively could remain errand runners. These are the fags, binds and pains of the profession.

Those who demonstrate competence and are found consistently independent would begin to require less supervision. Their output would begin to reach the highest levels of the organization directly instead of being all stopped at the supervisor's level. Individuals in this group soon become full, and if appropriate, registered professionals, and in time, may become part of the management. They would not only write formal reports and technical papers with confidence but supervise younger ones as well.

#### **1.1 Characteristics of Technical Communication**

The term 'technical' tends to connote something strictly engineering, perhaps even largely mechanical. However, it is much more elastic than that. There are technical aspects in the physical sciences, social sciences, engineering and the arts, and indeed all areas of human

endeavor in which acquisition or display of skill is pertinent. The key ingredients in technical operations are that they are governed by certain laws or rules and that they are formal.

Technical Writing is all formal writing or communication which is in accordance with certain guiding rules or principles. It is characterized by use of words and expressions that are simple, concrete and familiar rather than flowery, high-sounding ones. The style is decidedly impersonal and the tone is objective, with an absence of any attempt to arouse emotion.

## **1.2 Should Technical Report Writing be Formally Taught?**

The question as to whether or not Technical Report Writing or Technical Communication needs to be formally taught was posed. Most respondents (including students of the Faculty of Technology, Obafemi Awolowo University who offered the course; past students of the Faculty (alumni), and some high-ranking company officials in Nigeria) returned an emphatic **YES**. A few indicated that it could (or should) be learnt on the job. All respondents agreed that a good writing skill is an invaluable asset. Excerpts from some of the responses are:

*‘... It is most desirable to incorporate the principles of technical communication into the curricula of higher institutions. Our staff write daily, weekly, quarterly reports on project implementation, contracts specifications and cover sensitive meetings relating to manufacturing, assembly, installation and sales. They write to advertise products. They also write brochures, instruction manuals, maintenance manuals, etc. From experience, Technical Report Writing or Technical Communication is so sensitive, it can make or mar a business enterprise. There is a genuine need to formally teach the Principles of Technical Communication in higher institutions.’ – A.O. Omorilewa (a Senior Engineer)*

*‘..... I like the use of calm and restrained style in report-writing... I now prefer and use third person passive form. Thus I write “The logic gates were connected and the light was switched on.. .“ instead of “I connected the logic gates and (I) switched on the light...”. In abbreviating, I now write “3s.” rather than “3 secs.”, (‘10 g’ rather than ‘10gm’. etc.).’ - Former Student with Reg No. 902883*

*‘.....An engineer’s innovativeness, dynamism, accurate thinking and resourcefulness cannot be properly measured if he (or she) cannot communicate the ideas and thoughts... A fine report acts as a catalyst, a facilitator.., in the process of development especially for us in the less developed countries of the world... It is through good technical reports that people in need of technical assistance... can benefit from scientific and technological findings... We are able to follow up and improve upon the inventions of Einstein, Archimedes, Faraday..., Avogadro, Bernoulli, Rolls Royce, etc. (largely) because they were good technical report writers.’ - Olu Awoyinfa (MD of an Engineering & Management Consulting Firm)*

### **1.3 Common Writing Deficiencies**

Professionals and non-professionals alike often make certain surprising mistakes in writing letters, memoranda, and reports. Some of the mistakes can be annoying because they are not expected at the level of the writers concerned. Some selected common mistakes are briefly discussed. The purpose is not to provide an exhaustive list or even to develop formulas for detecting errors. Rather it is intended to call attention to and sensitize the writer to avoiding common writing pitfalls and in any case to further make a case for a formal inclusion of Technical Report Writing in the curricula of every higher institutions of learning.

### **1.3.1 Surnames not distinguishable**

One practice very common among students at all levels of education is that when they write their names in full, the surnames are difficult to determine. On most forms to be filled, the place where the surname is to be placed is usually indicated. But where such guidance is not provided, all but the careful ones are prone to errors.

To a question as to how names should be written such that surnames are clearly distinguishable from other names, students give such answers as ‘the surname must be written first’; ‘the surname must be written last’; ‘I would write out the surname in full and use initials for the others’. Such answers, of course, are unsatisfactory. The surname may be written first or last without violating any national or international convention. Also, there are many situations where other names are required to be written in full, in which case the use of initials may not be adequate.

Consider the following names as written and identify the surnames in each case:

1. Abayomi Adegoke
2. Abiodun Abayomi
3. Ogunwande Adeleke
4. Anderson Jack
5. Musa Shehu
6. Yusuf Emeka
7. Olusegun John
8. Obioha Ngozi
9. David Okunade

Since a surname can be written first or last, and given the widespread confusion in the way individuals handle this simple task, one would only be guessing as to what was meant to be the surname in each case.

However, written as the names are (without suitable punctuation marks) the name that is written last would generally be treated as the surname. Thus, in 1 to 9 above, the surnames, respectively, would be thought to be Adegoke, Abayomi, Adeleke, Jack, Shehu, Emeka, John, Ngozi and Okunade.

One general guiding rule to solve the problem is this: (1). accept the first- written name as the surname if it is followed by a comma, or (2). if it is written in capital letters while the other names are written in lower case or (3). if it is underlined, otherwise (4). accept the last-written as the surname. Examine the following:

- (a) Obioha, Ngozi
- (b) ABAYOMI Abioduri
- (c) ADELEKE, Ogunwande
- (d) Musa, Shehu
- (e) JOHN, Olusegun
- (f) EmekaYusuf
- (g) Jack Anderson

In (a) to (g) above, the surnames are Obioha, Abayomi, Adeleke, Musa, John, Yusuf and Anderson. Notice that in (c), (d) and (e) the surnames may be said to be **over-identified**.

Does this all seem to be too much ado about nothing? It should not be. From experience, numerous students had missed scholarship awards and other valuable opportunities because their surnames, somehow, were treated as first and reduced to an initial. For example, the name Abdul Olusegun Rasheed was interpreted by the processing authority as A. O. Rasheed, when in fact he is O. R. Abdul (Abdul was the Surname). He was checking his name under 'A' and not finding it decided that he did not succeed.

Another closely related common mistake is in the form of truncating names. Friends may call Funke, Yinka, Abdul, Sola, Rukka, Femi, Oge , Ike, but in formal settings the names

should not be truncated. Write Olufunke, Adeyinka, Abdulrahaman, Olusola, Rukkayyat, Adefemi, Ogechi, Ikechukwu etc. as the case may be. For the name F. Anozie would not be accepted to be the same as O. Anozie when in fact it is Olufunke Anozie that has been so written. Many university alumni return certificates with complaints that the first names are wrong - Femi instead of Olufemi for example.

### **1.3.2 Spelling errors**

In the hundreds of term papers and laboratory reports that students submit and in numerous professional reports written in the names of establishments, certain spelling errors are surprisingly common. Some of the most common in our experience are tittle (for title), litterature (for literature), proffession (for profession), refrences (for references), writting (for writing), beleive (for believe), been (for being), being (for been), lenght (for length), etc. This can be a common ‘costly mistakes’ in a technical report

Fortunately there are facilities in most computer word-processing packages to perform spelling checks. It remains for the writer to be sensitive to making the spelling checks with the computer or manually.

### **1.3.3 Structurally deficient sentences**

Another form in which writing incompetence is reflected is in wrong sentence structuring. A few examples will suffice:

1. ‘In response to the advertisement for tenders. I hereby indicate my interest.’ Clearly the first full stop (.) should be replaced by a comma. This is a very common error. There is no verb in the first part, therefore, it is not a sentence. It is a phrase, or at best a clause. The sentence should read: ‘In response to the advertisement for tenders, I hereby indicate my interest.’

2. 'Having listened to the network news we welcome you back to ABC radio.'

The question here is 'who did the listening and who did the welcoming back? Let's rearrange the sentence:

'We, having listened to the ... news, welcome you back.....'.

Certainly that is not what was intended but it is what the sentence says. This is a problem of incorrect subject-verb relationship.

3. 'The objectives of the study include updating literature, sorting out correct procedures, and to perform laboratory tests....'.

The problem here is that of lack of parallelism. It is much better to write '... updating.. ., sorting..., and performing...'.

### **1.3.4 Other miscellaneous deficiencies**

There are several other communication inadequacies. Examples of some common ones are provided hereunder:

- 'I suppose to do it'. This is wrong. 'I am supposed to do it' is the correct way to say that. To be sure, the word 'suppose' can also be used as a verb (an intransitive verb): 'I suppose he is a member of the team', 'we all supposed him to be up to the task', 'do you suppose it will rain?'
- 'In response to your enquiry, find attached. ...'. This is not good enough. The word 'please' is needed: 'In response to your enquiry, please find attached......'
- 'He spoke to Akin and I'. This is wrong. 'He spoke to Akin and me' is the correct form. 'Akin and I took part in the competition'. This is correct. This is really a simple matter of subject and object.

- ‘We tried to advice him but he seems unreceptive to advise’. This is incorrect; ‘advice’ is the noun form, while ‘advise’ is a verb. Thus the two underlined words in the sentence should be interchanged. Consider other pairs: licence/license, practise/practice etc

#### **1.4 Objectives of Technical Communication**

It is intended to attempt to address a number of concerns raised in past Technical Reports; to provide an opportunity for students of higher institutions and professionals alike to learn to write well.

In learning about fundamental principles of report writing, standard report formatting, key elements of reports, graphic aids, literature citing and referencing, letter writing, thesis writing etc. the reader would do well to bear in mind the numerous writing deficiencies and pitfalls introduced earlier.

#### **1.5 Exercises**

1. From your own experience, list five (5) different (and varied) common technical writing pitfalls. Explain each briefly.
2. Write in support of, or against the statement: ‘It is necessary to formally teach principles of technical communication’.
3. Why is it important that surnames be (easily) distinguishable from other names? How would you write (in full) your own names: in a dissertation?; in a conference paper?; on a poster?
4. Each of the following sentences is faulty in one or more respects. Rewrite each sentence correctly:
  - (a) I, representing the whole class, is submitting this report.

- (b) The lecturer along with all the final year students are planning an excursion to some of the other geopolitical regions.
- (c) It is I he wants not they.
- (d) The project provides we students with various relevant exercise.
- (e) The tittles of her writings have being and still been evaluated with respect to the requirements of the profession.

**Reading List -**

1. Ogedengbe, M.O., Akanbi, C.T., Oladepo, K.T. and Adewumi, I.K. (2005). Technical Report Writing. Macmillan Nig. Publishers Ltd, Lagos. Nigeria. 95pp.
2. Odigboh, E. U and Osuagwu, C.C. (2003): Effective Communication of Technical Ideas in Science and Engineering. Top Quality Services, Energy Lab. Physics Dept. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 374pp.

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