

TECHNICAL NOTE

Assorted writing tips

Dr Ian Fordyce

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This isn't a formal style manual or a writing guide – just a gentle reminder to Yarra Yarra staff about some frequent booboos in written work.

The main thing to keep in mind when putting thoughts on paper is 'what's this for?' If you're only jotting down notes for yourself, then it doesn't matter what it looks like – as long as it makes sense to you personally. But if the purpose is to communicate a message to somebody else, then rules and conventions become important. I don't mean grammatical subtleties, like the difference between 'compare with' and 'compare to'. Basic stuff, like ending a sentence with a full-stop. Or combining similar sentences/thoughts into a single paragraph. Or breaking up a sentence with commas. Make the message as easy as possible to understand, and only include things that are relevant. Don't confuse people with long and winding sentences.

Here're some common sources of confusion and suggestions for avoiding them.

1. Abbreviations should be standard, rather than private or local terms. Some common examples: standard abbreviations for units of distance are m (metre), mm (millimetre) and km (kilometre). Plurals are unchanged, so that ten kilometres is abbreviated as 10 km (not 10 km's or 10 kmtrs). Note that the prefix m is short for mille (a thousandth, as in milligram (mg)), while M stands for mega (a million, as in megalitre (ML)).
2. Keep acronyms to a minimum or avoid them altogether. Some, like WA or CSIRO, are probably well-enough understood (at least in Australia) to be used without any explanation. Others, like NACC, NAR, DEC and YYCMG, might be perfectly familiar to a local audience, but you wouldn't have to go far to find people who have no idea what these acronyms mean. And how many people, even locals, understand CRC-LEME, VPD, EEI, PPF or DOLA? For the sake of uninformed readers then, acronyms should

be written out in full the first time they're used. An alternative is to write up a glossary of all acronyms, abbreviations and symbols in the text.

The same goes for jargon (e.g. 'ascon survey', 'Munsell colour') and specialised terms (e.g. 'ferricrete', 'regolith'), or expressions that don't have quite their common meaning (e.g. 'significant difference', 'soil texture', 'plant habit').

3. Note EC (electrical conductivity) – not eC or Ec or ec. Also pH (the negative logarithm of hydrogen ion activity – commonly (and usually wrongly) equated with acidity). Not Ph (which most people understand as an abbreviation of Phillip or philosophy). And not ph or PH, which probably don't mean anything.

4. Avoid Americanisms and American spelling, which can creep into your writing through Spellcheck or Autocorrect defaults. Check the settings on your word processing program. [The Tools/Options menu is usually a good place to look for these. Or try using the Help menu. Or ask.] Common American words like 'trash' or 'movie' are usually understood in Australia (and may even be in regular use in some sections of the community). Likewise, American spellings, such as 'substory' (for substorey), 'traveling' (for travelling), 'realize' (for realise), 'neighbor' (for neighbour), or 'Dr.' (for Dr). Personally, I can live with these American things if I really have to. However, if there's also a random sprinkling of Australian spellings (because of, say, a 'cut-and-paste' job from another computer, where the Autocorrect option had been disabled), the whole text can look rather shoddy.

5. Beware of Spellcheck. Quite apart from the possibility of introducing unwanted Americanisms, there's also the danger of similar-looking words with very different meanings. For example, the spoil-bank along a drain or a creek is sometimes called a levée (if it's continuous and is intended to control floodwater), but a levy is an impost (usually monetary) – a tax for a specific purpose. Although both words have the same pronunciation, the spelling's so different that there's not much chance of confusing the two in a written text. However, the difference between adjectives derived from these two

words, levéed and levied respectively, is less obvious. Unless you've specifically customised your dictionary, running Spellcheck might expose the reader to the bewildering notion of a "double-levied deep drain".

Yarra Yarra people aren't the only ones to make this error. I've come across this very same expression, as well as other obvious examples of 'Spellcheckitis' in agency reports.

6. Adjust the word order or use hyphens to minimise confusion for the reader. For example, there is a very big difference between a six-year-old tree and six year-old trees. More detailed examples are not the same as more-detailed examples. In 'the fat farmer's wife', it's the wife who's overweight. If it's actually the farmer, not the wife, who's the podgy one, then you have to reconstruct your phrase to 'the wife of the fat farmer'.

7. People seem to be having a lot of trouble with apostrophe (') s. This isn't just in the Yarra Yarra region or the wheatbelt or WA – it's a widespread phenomenon. In general, 's denotes possession (as in "Russell's farm"). It shouldn't ever be used for plurals (like "photo's" or "the 1990's" or "the MacPherson's"). Early last century, some editors approved the use of 's for certain plurals (mostly abbreviations of foreign words), but it's definitely not on now (and hasn't been acceptable for the last 40 or 50 years).

Another occasion the apostrophe's used is in place of missing letters. For example, "it's" can be short for "it is" or "it has", as in "It's a long way to Tipperary" or "It's been a long time". "Don't" is short for "do not". "Can't" is short for "can not". Etc.

There's a special situation with the some pronouns, e.g. the word "it". The possessive ("its", meaning "belonging to it") doesn't have a apostrophe (presumably to distinguish it from "it's", meaning "it is" or "it has"). Some other pronouns, where the possessive similarly doesn't end in apostrophe s, are "whose", "your" and "their" (not to be confused with who's, you're and they're, which mean respectively "who is" (or "who has"), "you are" and "they are").

8. Affect and effect are not interchangeable words. Affect is a verb (its participles – affecting and affected -- can also be used as adjectives), as in "the salt-affected site" or "Waterlogging and salinity affect valley floors in the region". Effect, in its usual sense, is the noun of affect, e.g. "The effects of rising groundwater are clearly visible".

There's another use of effect, as a verb to suggest a successful treatment, as in "effect a change", "effect a cure". This meaning isn't common in modern writing; it's more familiar as the adjective "effective".

9. The word "however" is not a conjunction like and or but. It shouldn't be used to join two clauses to make a single sentence. For example, the sentence "The shrub *Melaleuca hamata* is moderately salt-tolerant, however growth rates can be severely retarded in saline ground." is plain wrong. The sentence should be broken up, thus "The shrub *Melaleuca hamata* is moderately salt-tolerant. However, growth rates can be severely retarded in salty ground". An acceptable alternative (in this example) is to use a semicolon, thus "The shrub *Melaleuca hamata* is moderately salt-tolerant; however, growth rates can be severely retarded in salty ground".

10. Be careful that what you write is actually what you mean. The following example, which I feel strongly about, appeared in a report earlier this year. "The area was examined by two independent scientists". This claims that the two scientists who examined the area were completely independent of (i.e. had no connection with) the Yarra Yarra Catchment Management Group. Apparently, what was intended was the statement that two scientists had independently examined the area, which's an entirely different matter. The original statement is misleading, since both of the scientists in question were being paid by the Yarra Yarra Catchment Management Group at the time. Admittedly, it wasn't intentionally misleading, but that probably wouldn't be enough to prevent legal repercussions.

To summarise, writing effectively isn't just a matter of putting your thoughts on paper. The editing part's important too. Read through what you've written (better still, get somebody else to do a test-read). If there's more than one way of understanding a

sentence, you can be pretty sure that at least half your readers will choose the wrong one. For grammar, spelling and technical conventions; don't simply take your lead from other reports – especially those that're (a) unedited, (b) published only on the internet, and/or (c) written by engineers or hydrologists (who're notoriously loose with language).