Tips, tools, and techniques for technical writers

Old paradigms never die

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Modern technical writing has one paradigm—use correct grammar and syntax—and many author-optional guidelines (i.e., the goal of this column). These guidelines recognize the variability of authors and the variety of their styles but constantly caution: Invoke styles consistent with how readers read, interpret, and retain. Otherwise, you’ll ruin your document. Technical writing continues to evolve, generally toward improvement. But, not unlike nature, it retains vestiges of its past. I’m referring to outmoded paradigms. Once the vogue, they fell into disuse for good reasons and should be forgotten, but as with “old soldiers,” old paradigms “never die.” Unfortunately, “they don’t just fade away” either. What led me to this conundrum are the following excerpts from an e-mail exchange I had with a friend in England.

Ken:

I have followed your series of articles on the construction of technical papers and abstracts over the years. I am a great believer in the philosophy you propound, for the simple reason that to acquire knowledge is easier if the prose is interesting. However, there does exist in the industry the impression that papers will be accepted by the SEG and their ilk, if the prose is passive and the text is, to quote, “boring” (first old paradigm).

I have often rewritten reports that I found interesting, into the passive voice, and I have also had to remove all their interesting comments, as well as the bits that amused me while reading the report (another old paradigm). Too often we geoscientists have to read glutinous masses of irrelevance to find out what idea someone is trying to pass on. I believe that a small nugget of humour or interest “fixes” the point into the overcrowded brain of today’s geoscientist, and is therefore to be encouraged, as opposed to removed.

I believe that this situation will not change until the SEG categorically states that papers will not be considered unless they use the active voice, and that the papers exhibit attempts to interest readers. …

—Name withheld by request

My reply:

I was just in your neck of the woods and I ran into a similar experience with a friend. She is a new doctor and still feeling her way through the mores, folkways, and politics. She asked me to look at a (draft) paper she had written … which she was now submitting to a competition. Before I looked at the manuscript, she told me she had two major issues. First, she had already submitted the manuscript for review to her mentor/boss. He liked it but told her to add his name and the name of another person with whom she had discussed the work, after having written this manuscript. Neither of these gentlemen had anything to do with the study or its writeup. She was clearly upset about this demand, realizing its implication and usurping unearned credit! I suggested acknowledgments, but not coauthorship. She agreed but said it would not be politically wise (old paradigm). … She knew that if they didn’t add their names would create immediate problems and future bumps in her career. Her second issue was “being forced to write in passive voice.” Again, realizing that passive wasn’t the best way or her choice, but for political reasons she felt that the stodgy old (expletive omitted) judging the competition would frown on active voice. Also, her advisor/boss “strongly recommended” passive voice. To them, active voice is not “professional, objective, and impersonal” and that good medicine (like all good science) must be void of human judgment and involvement! (Old and idealistic paradigm.) … Despite the obstacles created by compulsive passive voice writing, and who knows what other antiquated paradigms, I can only wonder how much better her paper would have been had she been given the freedom to write her story in her own style.

I find it very interesting that a new professional like her and an established professional like you both recognize that the pressures of the “Theys” who stand up before us with stick in one hand slapping the other hand, ready to strike should we decide to forsake compelled, outdated, and boring paradigms—paradigms that just won’t die! I don’t know who the “Theys” are or why they have so much power, but we all fall under their specter.

His reply:

The “theys” are the people who pay me to write the reports and papers, and would not do so again if I stood up to them (yet another old paradigm). It’s the same way that your friend had to knuckle down to a presumed and antiquated paradigm. Maybe it is a generational thing, something we inherit from the previous generations; heavens, I am in my 50s, as are many professionals in the geosciences. Maybe you could show a small paper written in both styles. I did this myself (for my client) but it is not ready to be published until his board gives the OK.

P.S. I always proofread because we Brits are not taught touch typing at school so we do not trust our typing skills. Also a major part of my job is to communicate scientific concepts to people whose first language is rarely English so I have to be very careful. It’s a habit I rather like.

This exchange says it all. Unlike new data analysis methods in geophysics, which supersede and update the old, technical writing is very resistant to modernization and improvement. We may complain about what we confront in technical journals, reports, etc., but few of us dare ignore those old paradigms— that is, if we want to be published.