

Vocabulary

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Some people like words and others like numbers. The sad truth is that those who like words rarely like numbers too, and vice versa. Engineers often have love affairs with figures (having passed a range of mathematically oriented examinations in order to become engineers) but tend to feel that words are out to get them. As a result, they are uneasy about writing continuous prose and long for the release of a friendly equation.

Choice of words

Words are indeed difficult in the English language. They are spelt in odd ways, often pronounced differently from the way they look, may sound the same as each other but have different meanings, and there are so many of them. It is a great advantage to have a language which is rich in synonyms (words which

mean more or less the same thing), but there is a catch in this: which words should we choose?

The answer to this question is in four parts. We should choose words that are:

- understood by the reader
- familiar without being hackneyed
- accurate
- as simple as the subject matter allows.

The first of these points is sometimes overlooked. Engineers often write for a wide audience, not all of whom will have the same specialist knowledge. One of the early, preparatory questions to be asked before beginning to write any document is about the knowledge and experience levels of the intended readership. Will most of the readers understand the technical terms used? If not, and if help is not readily available, they will quickly become irritated with the writer and the text; they may even stop reading. There is of course a danger in over-explaining, seeming to patronise the readers; if too much is explained, they will soon be just as annoyed, and may stop reading. Readers often have different levels of expertise from those of the writer, but it is the writer's job to decide how much explanation is appropriate, and then to be consistent.

The best way out of the difficulty in most cases is to include a glossary of technical terms and abbreviations which might be unknown to at least some readers. Such glossaries are common in reports and specifications, and are helpful to those who need them. As long as the existence of the glossary is made clear in the contents list, readers can look up what they don't know. At the same time, a glossary is unobtrusive for those who have the appropriate specialist knowledge; they can simply ignore it. In the case of a shorter document such as an email or technical note, it is usually better simply to write the terms in full or add a short explanatory phrase rather than risk leaving the recipient bewildered.

English is an international language

The readership for some technical writing, however, will be much wider; an engineer may be writing for an international readership. On the whole, technical terms will cause less difficulty than the 'simple' words in between – worldwide, many engineers receive their technical training in English. It is words or expressions which are used by native English speakers in a colloquial way or which refer to concepts local to Western European culture which cause the greatest difficulty. 'Letting off steam' might sound to someone unfamiliar with the expression as if it applied to an old-fashioned railway engine rather than an

engineer under stress, while a 'bank holiday' might suggest a day on which banks enjoyed their own day of rest rather than a national holiday (see also p. 128 for the implications of this problem when writing for publication).

The same principles apply to engineering writing for a readership which is not primarily English speaking. Expressions which are 'local' should be avoided, and the writer should show sensitivity, as far as possible, in not using expressions which are unnecessarily complicated; for example, 'on no account do this' can be expressed more simply and clearly as 'do not do this'. Nevertheless, if the only accurate word or expression is rare or complex, it must be used, as accuracy cannot be sacrificed to familiarity. In such cases, a note might be appropriate, or, better still, a diagram. Illustrations are on the whole more easily and widely understood than paragraphs of explanation. Writers should always be aware of their readers, remembering that engineering information is sometimes translated into other languages; there is no point in making life harder than necessary for the translators.

Use words and expressions which readers understand; if appropriate, include a glossary.

American English

Many engineers work for American or multinational companies, and it is worth remembering that we often fail to share our common language. Differences in spelling are well known: color, traveling, center are all acceptable in American English, and as a result may be the forms desired by the computer's dictionary. It is always worth setting the spellcheck for the type of English used, that is, English (UK) rather than English (US). When meanings are different, the problem is more serious. A UK gallon is about a sixth more than a US gallon, an English pharmacist is an American druggist, although in both countries the word 'chemist' is used for a scientist whose specialism is chemistry. A billion has since the 1970s been standardised at 1000 million on both sides of the Atlantic, although not necessarily worldwide; the word 'milliard' is used in some parts of the world for a thousand million, 'billion' being reserved for a million million, its old meaning in the UK too. The British ground floor (American first floor) may still cause misunderstanding, and 'to table a motion' at an American meeting is to set it aside – exactly the opposite to the British meaning. The only guideline is that if you find yourself arguing with an American colleague, check that it is not the language which is dividing you rather than the subject of debate.

Templates can cause problems: they may use US English, and if they are incorporated into an English (UK) document, the reader may be disconcerted

even if not actually misled. Similarly, it is useful to check the language form used in documents sent to you before incorporating them in your own material.

Be alert to the needs of an international readership.

Foreign words and phrases

English itself has assimilated a great number of foreign words and phrases; it also uses some which have not been assimilated but remain 'foreign' and are generally put in italics as a result. In the past, professional writing was full of these expressions, especially in published references (*op. cit.*, *ibid.*). Many people nowadays do not understand such expressions, which are seen as pompous and self-important. Unless there is a good reason for using a foreign expression, or it is widely accepted, avoid it. If you need to use it, decide whether it has become part of the English language or still needs italics, and then be consistent in its use.

Prefixes

Prefixes (additions to the beginnings of words), however, often have their origins in foreign languages, and it is useful to be able to recognise them. Bi means two or twice (originally Latin), and knowing that, we can more easily understand words like bilateral, bipartite or binary. Some prefixes are easily confused, such as ante (before) and anti (against), hyper (beyond, above) and hypo (under, below), inter (between) and intro (inside).

Accuracy

In technical writing, words must be used accurately and the reader must understand the way in which they are used. Accuracy has three aspects:

- Words must be used so that the intended meaning is conveyed precisely.
- The words which appear in the text must be the exact words that the author intended.
- The reader must recognise the words as appropriate in their context.

Activity 4.1 Prefixes

Decide what the prefix means in each of the following words, and find other words which also use these prefixes.

Ambivalent, homogenous, malfunction, metabolism, retrograde.

All these criteria present problems.

Inaccurate use of words is usually the result of imprecise thinking. The engineer who produced the following example did not consider exactly what needed to be said before putting fingers to keyboard:

The purpose of this email is to notify all company personnel involved with the Zero project of the present situation regarding outstanding items not delivered to the customer yet for one reason or another.

As a result of this failure to identify the message, the writer uses unnecessary and confusing words. 'The purpose of this email is to notify' is self-evident. Items which have not been delivered to the customer yet *are* outstanding items. The sentence peters out with the strange comment 'for one reason or another'. This sounds worrying – all sorts of things are going wrong – but it means nothing. Words are used so loosely that the recipients must have felt as if they were holding tightly onto jelly, which oozed through their fingers.

The writer needs to clarify the message first of all:

We've problems of late delivery on the Zero project. This is the current situation.

The chosen method of communication is an email. The subject line can be 'Zero project: late delivery' and the email will of course be sent to the appropriate people, and so they don't have to be told who they are. All that is needed is a brief sentence or two about the present situation and a suitable signing off (see pp. 5–7 for discussion of email format).

Illogicality in writing can result from similar poor planning. Words convey the wrong meaning, for example:

As the metal becomes harder and hence an increase in carbon content, the metal tends not to increase its reduction, but instead the area is less than a metal with less carbon.

The underlying problem in this sentence is perhaps the writer's ignorance of the measurement 'reduction of area', that is, the ductility of the metal. While there has been an attempt to relate hardness to carbon content, the message has not been thought through. The hardness of the metal does not, as is suggested, result ('hence') in an increase in carbon content; rather, as the carbon content increases, we find an increase in hardness. The word 'hence' is totally misleading. The oddly expressed 'tends not to increase its reduction' is confusing, not least because of the juxtaposition of 'not' with 'increase' and 'reduction'. The last part of the sentence is probably an attempt to reiterate the first part, but the writer is too ill

at ease with the information to be able to say anything on the subject clearly. The sentence might be written simply as:

As the carbon content increases, so does the hardness, and at the same time the ductility of the metal is reduced.

Identify the message and plan its expression.

Pairs of words

Words discussed in this section

Stationery and stationary, draft and draught, cite, sight and site, moral and morale, personal and personnel, accede and exceed, access and assess, apprise and appraise, principle and principal, affect and effect, advice and advise, device and devise, practice and practise, licence and license, disinterested and uninterested, complex and complicated, imply and infer, deny and refute, expect and anticipate.

English contains many words which sound alike but have different spellings and different meanings. A writer in a hurry can easily confuse words which, under other circumstances, would easily be distinguished. Such words are *stationery* (writing paper) and *stationary* (without movement), *principal* (chief) and *principle* (underlying rule such as a principle of engineering, or a moral basis), *draft* (rough version) and *draught* (current of air). Sometimes a group of three words can cause confusion, such as *cite* (quote), *sight* (vision) and *site* (area of land). The spellcheck is no help in drawing attention to a misuse of these words, and, perhaps as a result, such mistakes are surprisingly common. The effect can be faintly comical, as in the case of the student who wrote:

Diamond is tough and is covalent, but other chain polymers may be extremely week.

Some pairs of words sound almost, but not quite, the same and are easily confused, such as *moral* (ethical) and *morale* (emotional condition) or *personal* (belonging to the individual) and *personnel* (staff). Some such difficulties arise regularly in engineering writing, for instance *accede* and *exceed*; *access* and *assess*; *apprise* and *appraise*.

accede = assent to ('He acceded to my request.')

exceed = surpass ('He exceeded the speed limit.')

access = entry ('access to the building')

assess = weigh up ('assess the capability of the machine')

apprise = inform ('apprised of the current situation')

appraise = estimate, consider the value of ('The position was appraised before a new appointment was made.')

A further common example is slightly more complicated: *affect* and *effect*. The difficulty arises because 'effect' can be both noun and verb, and also because many people do not pronounce the words clearly, probably because they are not sure which is which! *Affect* is a verb, which means 'to have an influence on', as in:

Studying engineering to an advanced level has affected his job prospects.

Effect can be a verb, meaning 'to bring about', as in:

Study, hard work and experience combined to effect an improvement in his career prospects.

Effect can also be a noun, meaning 'an influence' or 'the result', for example:

His overseas experience has had an effect on his career pattern.

The effect of his hard work has been rapid promotion.

Other pairs of words which often give trouble are those which depend for their spelling on the way in which they are used. Some have a useful difference in pronunciation, such as: *advice/advise* and *device/devise*, while others sound the same, such as: *practice/practise* and *licence/license*. In each case, the noun has a c and the verb has an s. For example:

I can advise you to study engineering, but will you take my advice?

He perfected a device for sounding the alarm but could not devise a way of ensuring that people would respond.

Sometimes words with a similar derivation have nowadays moved further apart so that their meanings are different:

disinterested = impartial, without prejudice ('His opinion was disinterested and so of great value.')

uninterested = having no interest in (almost bored) ('The students were uninterested in the subject and so made little progress.')

complex = involved, technically difficult ('The equations were too complex for the students to follow.')

complicated = mixed up, difficult to untangle ('The directions were too complicated to follow and so we got lost.')

Other words which are often confused are *imply* and *infer*, *deny* and *refute*, *expect* and *anticipate*, *continuous* and *continual*:

imply = suggest, hint ('He implied that there was a problem.')

infer = understand, assume a meaning ('We inferred that it was our responsibility to fix it.')

deny = simply to declare that something is not true ('The suspect denied that he was at the scene of the crime.')

refute = to prove that something is not true ('The allegation was refuted and so the police had to start again.')

expect = to think that something will happen in the future ('We expect to leave in time to catch the train.')

anticipate = to take action in the light of that expectation ('We completed the work early as we anticipated needing to leave in good time.')

continuous = non-stop ('The fire alarm sounded continuously until everyone had left the building.')

continual = very frequent ('The continual arguments from the next room were an irritating distraction.')

(See also the section on specification writing, pp. 26–8, for a discussion of the following:

can/could; may/might; should/would; will/shall/must.)

In all these cases, the problems of word confusion are obvious but the solutions much less so. A writer of technical information must be aware of words and the ways in which they can be confused, alert to the look and sound of words, and careful and attentive in both listening and writing. Pronunciation can have a direct impact on spelling: a mistake such as 'failiure' is the result of saying the extra 'i' after the 'l' and then hearing and writing it (to be fair, the spellcheck would pick this up); 'presence' and 'presents' can sound exactly the same if they are carelessly spoken; the misspelling 'maintainance' is usually the effect of pronouncing the word that way rather than, correctly, 'maintenance'. As with most problems of English, critical reading will help, together with a determination to make friends with words as well as numbers. In this respect, an e-reader with a use of words function can be a helpful aid to correct usage.

Choose words with care; read critically.

Activity 4.2 Word confusion

Identify the mistakes in the following passage.

The stationery vehicle was the principle cause of the traffic jam. Motorists were adviced to find a different route until the police could affect a solution to the problem. Later, some inferred that the authorities had been disinterested until the chief constable's car had been delayed, a charge that was strenuously refuted in their statement but was sighted next day in the papers.

Synonyms

Earlier in this chapter, the comment was made that English is particularly rich in synonyms – words which have exactly the same, or sometimes a very slightly different, meaning. However, apart from the dictionary definition, there is also the feel of a word; we know almost instinctively which word to choose for a particular context. *Difficult*, *hard* and *troublesome* can all mean the same thing, yet we would not be likely to describe a difficult question as troublesome or a troublesome toothache as difficult.

Some synonyms cause particular problems because, while their meanings are the same, the implications are different. A *request* is different from a *desire to know* or a *demand to know*; a speaker might prefer to be thought of as *forceful*, while listeners might use the word *aggressive*. It depends on the point of view! We choose words not only for their meaning but also for their implications: so we may congratulate a friend for showing *determination* while deprecating the *stubbornness* of an opponent. We may hesitate to *recommend* a course of action, and so we *suggest* it, which sounds milder, and of course if things go wrong, we can always claim that it was only a suggestion.

Dictionaries are of limited use only in showing such fine shades of meaning, and people who are writing in a second language inevitably find this an enormous challenge. The only answer is a long-term one: be alert and sensitive to the way in which good writers and speakers use the language and learn from them.

Be aware of the subtle differences between apparent synonyms.

Precision

Words discussed in this section

Power, aggravate, unique, former and latter, number, majority and fewer, amount, greater (lesser) and less, regular, where and when.

Words can change their meaning according to their context. If we look up *power* in the dictionary, we find a wide range of meanings, including *ability to act, vigour, energy, government, personal ascendancy, authorisation, influential person, magnifying capacity* and so on. The writer must be sure that the intended meaning is clear to the reader. We know what we mean if we talk about 'six to the power of ten' or 'switching on the power supply' or 'the power of a song to move the listener', but if we say that we have the '*power*' to make a particular piece of information known, do we mean the '*authority*' or just the '*ability*'? Our reader might not be sure which is the correct interpretation, and we must clarify our intention.

Casual speech sometimes misuses words in a way which is not acceptable in the written language. *Aggravate* means 'to make worse' (not 'to annoy'). *Unique* means that there is only one example in existence, not that it is rare. *Former* and *latter* are the first and second of two, never more than two; the correct use is shown in the following example:

The lights and the steering need to be adjusted: the former can be done at once but the latter will take us a bit longer and so we will need the car tomorrow as well as today.

Other groups of words are often misused: *number*, *majority* and *fewer* always refer to several objects or people, while *amount*, *greater* (or *lesser*) *part* and *less* refer to only one object or person. For example:

There was a large number of delegates, and the majority favoured the new agreement. Fewer than a hundred objected.
There was a large amount of work still to be done, the greater part of which, on this occasion, had to be completed during the night. Fewer workers and less time will be needed in future.

Accuracy of expression also means that the words chosen are in themselves precise. Words and phrases such as *fairly*, *quite*, *rather*, *to a limited extent* and *in due course* produce a vague, hesitant impression, while *very*, *extremely*, *mainly* and *substantially* sound important but convey no precise picture, for example:

Our experiments were fairly successful and we are generally hopeful that we shall be able to make the results public in due course.

This means very little. What is 'fairly successful'? Some of the experiments, or on some occasions? What percentages? 'Generally hopeful'? All of them or only most of them? Most of the time? When they aren't feeling depressed? 'In due course'? Next week? Next year? Eventually, if we're lucky? While it would be wrong to suggest that such words and phrases are always unhelpful and should therefore never be used, they can be irritating to the reader who is looking for precise information. If it is possible to be exact, then be exact:

We have been successful with 60% of our experiments, and provided there are no unforeseen problems, we shall make the results public within the next two months.

So now they know!

Further help with difficult words such as 'shall' and 'could' is given under Specifications (pp. 26–8), where their use is of particular importance.

Engineering information must always be accurate; it must also be conveyed accurately. Lack of precision can have serious implications, and it is often the case

that while the technical terms are correctly used, the small English words which appear in between the technical words cause ambiguity or misunderstanding. Two short examples illustrate this:

In future, the company will need less skilled workers for the night shift.
In future, the company will need fewer skilled workers for the night shift.

Which meaning was intended? In the first sentence, the same number of workers could have less training or experience and so less skill; in the second, the company will not need so many workers, perhaps because they are highly skilled. There is clearly a significant difference. *Less* describes the degree of skill, while *fewer* refers to the number of workers.

A similar problem arises, again because of the imprecise use of words, in the following example:

Maintenance shall be carried out at regular intervals or where there is evidence of malfunction.

'At regular intervals' means little more than 'in due course'; how regular is regular? Every ten years? 'Or' does not really signify an alternative, but an additional reason for maintenance. 'Where' is not used in its usual meaning of 'the place where'; in casual conversation, we often confuse 'where' and 'when' and little harm is done; in the above sentence, the difference between place and time is crucial. This might be rephrased as:

Maintenance shall be carried out at six-monthly intervals and whenever there is evidence of malfunction.

As we can see from these examples, words which seem in themselves to be unimportant can change the meaning for the reader.

Words must not only be used accurately, they must also appear accurately in the text. This means that they are spelt correctly and the printed version says exactly what the writer intended. Checking, an important stage in the production of any document, is discussed later. It is enough at this stage to point out that unchecked work can look very odd on the page, as in the case of the engineer who wrote, in awful handwriting, '50 ft', and was appalled to discover that it had been reproduced (unchecked) as 'soft'.

Spelling new words

English spelling can be a nightmare, slightly mitigated nowadays by the computer spellcheck facility. As we have seen, this has great advantages but also limitations, and it is still worth having a dictionary on the desk. Some words will in any case escape because they are too new or too technical for either aid. It is worth adding

such words, if they will be used frequently, to the computer dictionary, but with the reservation that the spelling should be checked first. It is not unknown for words to be added incorrectly, causing continuing problems.

Both management and modern technology produce new words or reuse old words in a new form. Some have limited application, while others become widely known and used. For example, people in the past would have registered 'mouse' as a small furry animal; most people now would more quickly think of it as a device for selecting objects or defining positions on the screen. Sometimes modern developments give rise to complicated-sounding expressions, such as 'negative corporate worth', defined as the disadvantage for a subsidiary company of belonging to a larger corporation. Technology seems to favour composite words made up of words which in themselves are short and simple: 'workstation' and 'spreadsheet' are two examples. On the whole, such words are joined up without a hyphen, unless they look odd or are hard to recognise (real-life is easier than reallife). Too many words containing hyphens can also become overwhelming. It is not easy to read a sentence like the following:

This is network-transparent, operating-system-independent and portable ... it promises to revolutionise high-end computing.

If the writer is in doubt about how to write new words, the best guidance is probably to check what the major journals in the field are doing. The engineering institutions are likely to face such questions early on, and their decisions may well set the standard for future usage.

Since English is a living language, usage that was once 'wrong' may gradually have become acceptable. The most common example of this is 'data', a plural word (singular datum) nowadays often used as a singular, the rationale for this being that data is a collective noun like 'group' or 'committee'. However, such developments, at least in the short term, do not influence similar words, and 'strata' and 'criteria' are still considered to be plural (singulars stratum, criterion).

Common spelling problems

Old words can be as worrying as new words, and there are many common words in English that are just difficult to spell. There is little logic about English spelling, and the rules that exist generally have a great many exceptions. The only one which is worth remembering is 'i before e except after c, as long as the sound is ee'; this rule (provided it is remembered in its entirety) is actually helpful, as there are many instances in which it is followed (believe, receive, height) and comparatively few exceptions (seize, friend). It is always worth making up

mnemonics for one's personal list of most hated words; the more silly the idea, the easier it is to remember it (for instance, 'liaison' needs more than one person and so contains two i's).

A common confusion is between 'there', 'their' and 'they're'. An easy way to remember the first two is to think of 'there' as 't-here', since 'here' refers to place, and so does 'there'; 'their' means 'belonging to them', which has no 'place' element, that is, no 'here' in it. The third, 'they're', means 'they are', and such an abbreviation will rarely be used in technical writing (see pp. 40–1 for formality of style).

Use the computer's spellcheck and a dictionary, both with great care!

Simple language

Words should be as simple as the context allows. Some writers seem to aim at confusion, as, for instance, does the author of the following guideline for the numbering of tables in reports:

Tables will be given successive decimal integer numbers of ascending value starting at unity.

This means no more than:

Number tables sequentially from 1.

Indeed, 'from 1' would almost certainly be assumed by the reader and could be left out. Fourteen words have been reduced to three! Yet the real-life sentence quoted above in its original form is typical of much engineering writing. Instead of making their point in a simple, straightforward way, writers wrap their message in long sentences made up of words which are intended to sound impressive. It is amazing what peculiarities can result. A recent development is to use nouns as verbs. 'Impact' is one example: 'making an impact' shows the word in its general sense, as a noun; 'staff shortages impacted output' shows the same word as a verb. 'Task', usually a noun, is another example: someone was described as being 'tasked with a mission'; the most interesting feature of this expression is that noun and verb could be exchanged, he could have been 'missioned with a task'. He was, in fact, given a job.

There seem to be various reasons for such pompous and wordy language. One is undoubtedly the need to hide unpleasant or embarrassing information, as in the following example:

Following our recent meeting, we feel we must put in writing what we believe to be the justifying factors leading to our proposed modest increases in costs.

Clearly, the writer is uncomfortable. Whatever should have been put in writing has actually been left out ('the factors' or some such expression), and the unfortunate word 'modest' has been dragged in to make the writer feel better. Modest by whose standards? Why should the company concerned stress that the rise was 'justified'? What have the writer's feelings and beliefs got to do with the situation? The use of 'recent' suggests the subtext, 'I should have done this sooner and am embarrassed to give the date.' It would have been better to come straight to the point:

In the light of our meeting on 21 January, I confirm that we shall shortly raise our prices.

If it is really necessary to say why this has happened, a short sentence of explanation could follow.

Pompous words are also used because they are felt to be more influential than everyday words. Writers 'acquaint their readers with' or 'advise their readers of', rather than simply telling or informing them. They 'render assistance' rather than 'give help' and they 'subject to examination' rather than 'examine'. They 'are in a position to undertake' rather than 'can' or 'are able to', and they 'peruse' documents when most people would read them; they prefer to 'utilise' rather than to 'use'. In so doing, they waste everybody's time and irritate the reader; they do not impress. Such inflated language, full of self-importance, may disguise the information. The engineer who wrote:

The number of samples tested is important. If it is too small, poor results can be concealed or indicate erroneous behavioural characteristics.

failed to analyse what was written. If the sample is too small, results give false indications, that is, give poor results. The sentence goes in a circle. The meaning behind all this was probably the obvious fact that:

A sufficient number of samples must be tested before the result can be considered valid.

Use simple words as far as the context permits.

Over-abbreviated language

However, there is an opposite problem that is becoming common in technical writing. Words are abbreviated so much that they are hardly recognisable. This tendency might be the result of a laudable determination not to overwhelm readers, as illustrated in the section above on using simple language, but if the

message is abbreviated too much, it becomes difficult for anyone to identify the message quickly and accurately. For example:

23/4/17 visit by SST to F6L to check crate loaders (CL). Flooding had damaged 1 of CL beyond repair and shall be replaced ASAP. Other 11 to be serviced by month end (Reg 2C of F6L safety regs.)

Apart from the general inaccessibility of this message, there is an oddity: one crate loader 'shall be replaced', which sounds like a specification requirement (see pp. 26–8), while the other 11 are 'to be serviced', which sounds casual.

Written in full, the passage is longer but much easier to comprehend:

On 23 April 2017 the Safety and Security Team was called to an incident in Building F6L. We found that twelve crate loaders had been compromised owing to significant overnight flooding. Although eleven of these were still operable, it was clear that one would need to be replaced. The eleven in working condition need to be serviced by the end of April to ensure compliance with Regulation 2C of Building F6L Safety Regulations.

Don't write so briefly that the meaning is unclear.

Avoiding clichés and slang

The final criterion in the choice of words is that they should be familiar to the reader without being hackneyed. One of the problems of the pompous words discussed above is that they are also rare and therefore not easily understood. We have been brought up with a certain amount of 'officialspeak' from public organisations, such as 'tender the correct fare' or 'passengers alight here', which are recognisable, but not natural. Few of us would use 'tender' or 'alight' in other contexts. Writers should use words which readers can recognise and feel at home with.

However, it is possible to go too far the other way. Expressions which are overused become clichés, dull and lifeless phrases which have ceased to make any impact. 'At the end of the day', meaning 'finally' or 'eventually'; 'at this present moment in time', meaning 'now'; 'leave no stone unturned', meaning 'try hard', are all such expressions, used to the point at which they distract or irritate the reader and so undermine confidence in the information itself. The odd use of 'persons' instead of the expected 'people' belongs to this category, as in:

Six persons will use this equipment.

Slang belongs only to the spoken word and then only in casual conversation between friends. In writing, it jars on the reader and interrupts concentration.

There is an example of this effect on p. 93, in the passage beginning 'It should be noted ...'. The writer used the (in this context) pompous word 'terminate' and then the slang expression 'start again from scratch'. The transition is unpleasant, as the reader is jerked from overformal language into everyday speech. Slang has no place in engineering writing.

Clichés and slang distract the reader and should be avoided.

Jargon

Jargon, however, comes in two kinds, one acceptable and the other not. The former is professional, understood by other engineers in the same discipline, but not part of the everyday language of the non-specialist. It would be impossible to manage without this sort of jargon, as it allows an expert to communicate easily with other experts. Both writers and readers take for granted a range of such expressions, assuming mutual understanding. However, two possible dangers arise from the use of such terms. One is that the reader will not understand, and the engineering writer must always be alert to the need for acceptable communication with the 'outside world', for instance with clients who have less specialist knowledge than the writer.

The other danger is more insidious: both writer and reader may assume understanding when none exists. The various uses of 'power' discussed on p. 63 show something of the problem. 'Overstress' is a technical term, but it contains a word commonly used with a different meaning; 'quite' is a particularly interesting example, as it is used in conflicting ways:

The solution was quite brilliant.

which means that it is absolutely brilliant, and

The solution was not quite what we were looking for.

which means that the solution was almost right, but not quite!

The other kind of jargon is widespread and horrible. It uses words unnecessarily, sounds pompous and either lacks or conceals meaning. There are temporarily popular words and phrases such as 'function' ('the engineering function' is the job of the engineer, that is, engineering), 'facility' (as in 'the manufacturing facility' meaning the factory) and 'solution', as in 'data retrieval solution', which means no more than 'data retrieval'. Such terms can be used effectively to disguise meaning, as in:

The interactive function of the project manager with the team was such that it necessitated urgent implementation of the staff transfer policy.

In other words, the project manager could not get on with the team and someone had to be moved, fast.

Activity 4.3 Inaccurate writing

Rewrite the following sentence accurately, in a shorter and clearer form.

Members of the team made an attempt to initiate the process, but couldn't perceive how to get their act together. The position was aggravated by an amount of software problems for which they were unable to devise solutions. They were told to try again with less people involved and at the end of the day were able to produce a more advantageous result which avoided the crisis situation that had been anticipated.

Professional jargon must be shared with the reader.

Popular jargon and slang should be avoided.

Summary

- Use words and expressions which readers understand; if necessary, include a glossary.
- Be alert to the needs of an international readership.
- Identify the message and plan its expression.
- Choose words thoughtfully; read critically.
- Be aware of the subtle differences between apparent synonyms.
- Use the computer's spellcheck and a dictionary, both with great care!
- Use simple words as far as the context permits.
- Don't write so briefly that the meaning is unclear.
- Clichés and slang distract the reader and should be avoided.
- Professional jargon must be shared with the reader.
- Popular jargon and slang should be avoided.