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## Toward an International English Style: 25 Editorial Improvements

Edmond H. Weiss, Ph.D.

# Toward an International English Style: 25 Editorial Improvements<sup>1</sup>

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Communication is hard enough when all the participants speak and write the same native language, or mother tongue. But when some of the parties are reading in their second or third language, the risks of misunderstanding rise exponentially.

English is the first language of about 400 million people (L1). But there are about another 750 million who speak it either as a second language (L2), usually in their business or profession, or as a foreign language (L3), speaking or reading only rarely, as needed. As difficult as it is to communicate clear, unambiguous information to members of L1, it is even more difficult to communicate with members of L2—who read and evaluate an increasingly larger proportion of our proposals and business documents. And it is still more difficult with members of L3.

Often, the tactics required for this kind of communication make English documents less readable and less interesting to sophisticated L1 readers. **By traditional standards, a well-written international English document is sometimes not “well written.”** That is, although being a skillful writer helps, it is not always enough.

There are hundreds of small, precise tactics for reducing the risk in an International English transaction. Those below depend from two broad, related strategies for adapting proposals and reports for L2 and L3 readers:

*First*, reduce the burden on the reader, in every way possible, always choosing the simpler and more direct form, the more accessible arrangement.

*Second*, anticipate what will happen if the reader needs to consult a bilingual dictionary, choosing vocabulary that is most likely to be defined there in the way you intended.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extended discussion, containing over 50 editorial tactics, see Edmond Weiss, *The Elements of International English Style*, M.E.Sharpe, 2005

## TWENTY-FIVE TACTICS

### 1. Adopt a controlled vocabulary

Many firms that write for an international audience elect to control the vocabulary and grammar in their documents. Using Ogden's *Basic English* as an inspiration, they develop a restricted vocabulary (1000-3000 words) and limit the number of permissible sentence patterns. As inconvenient, even chafing, as this may be for the professional communicator, it radically reduces on the burden on L2 and L3 readers, and especially on translators.

Fully-developed controlled languages, like *Simplified English*<sup>2</sup> (used internationally in the aircraft industry), even allow persons who speak English as their second language to *write* correct, reliable manuals and instructions in English.

Short of this extreme, though, one may merely adopt a limited dictionary, such as the *Beginner's Dictionary of American English Usage* (Collin, Lowi, and Weiland, NTC Pub Group, 1994), and use only words that appear in it.

### 2. Choose words with one or few meanings

You would think that short familiar words would be best for international communication. But often such basic verbs as *make, take, have, set*, and others can have scores of context-dependent meanings. International readers will have trouble with *make a difference* versus *make progress* versus *make sense*. My relatively small German-English dictionary, for example, offers 6 meanings for the English *fix* and 11 meanings for *mind*.

### 3. Choose the most common meaning of words with many meanings

During my first European seminar, I was asked repeatedly about my use of the word *address*: as in address a problem, address an issue, to be addressed later... This usage mystified my audience.

It is extremely useful to acquire bilingual dictionaries for the main languages of your L2 and L3 readers and to check a sample of your nouns and verbs. When several meanings of the English word are given you should either

- Assure that you are using the first or second meaning cited

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<sup>2</sup> AECMA (Association Europeene de Constructeurs de Materiel Aerospatial). "AECMA Simplified English Standard." Brussels, Belgium: AECMA Doc.PSC-85-6598, Issue I, 1995.

- Change to another word with fewer meanings
- Create a glossary item, explaining your meaning

Unfortunately, most of the world's dictionaries still honor policy of listing the oldest meanings of a word *first*, not mentioning the current meanings until the end of the entry. So, the first three or four definitions may be rare or archaic! For such words, find synonyms.

#### 4. Avoid verbs with two or three words in them

When possible, replace two-word verbs like *look at* or *carry on* with *examine* or *continue*. (The verb *resume* would lead to a complicated dictionary entry.) Also avoid three-word verbs like *put up with* or *make a fool of*; prefer *tolerate* or *embarrass*.

Of course, if words like *tolerate* do not appear in the controlled vocabulary, you have to use the other form.

#### 5. Use the simplest verb forms

If possible, avoid the emphatic and progressive English tenses. Instead of *we will be arriving* prefer *we will arrive*. Instead of *Do you have . . .* prefer *Have you . . .*. (Some forms of controlled English severely restrict the use of words ending in "ing," because of the several problems associated with this suffix.)

#### 6. Use indicative mood and active voice

Prefer verb forms in the order they are generally learned by students of foreign language: active before passive, indicative before subjunctive. Avoid *it has been determined that* and especially *should it be determined that*.

#### 7. Define all special terms in a glossary

International English documents should generally include a glossary of all coined, new, difficult, technical, or otherwise risky terms. Those who write with a controlled vocabulary must define any term not in that word list. Any word in the glossary should be highlighted in the text, through some special typography or color.

The usual way of presenting glossaries is as an attachment or appendix. More useful is a dynamic glossary that defines the difficult terms in a footnote area at the bottom of each page (or at the end of each two-page spread).

#### 8. Choose words that are pronounceable

Remember that nearly all readers subvocalize, saying words mentally to themselves as they read silently. So, words that are hard to pronounce will slow the reader. This advice is particularly germane in *naming* products, systems, or companies. Nearly every L2 and L3 has trouble with the *th* sound (especially unvoiced) and many Asian languages struggle with *l* and *r*. When General Instrument Corporation of Horsham, Pennsylvania, changed their image in 1996 they also adopted the more high-tech sounding name of NextLevel. In 1998 they will restore the original name, mainly because most of their Asian customers for cable-TV converter boxes have trouble with saying NextLevel. (Similarly, the spokesperson for McDonalds restaurants in Japan is called *Donald McDonald* not *Ronald*.)

### 9. Do not coin words that are not needed

Before coining or inventing a new word, be sure that there is not already a suitable English word that means what you want to say. Do not write *prioritize* for *rank* or *deselect* for *reject*. Do not use computer or business jargon where ordinary words will work. Do not write *interface* for *meet* or *visioning process* for *planning*.

If you must coin a word, be sure that it does not already have a meaning of its own. One of my clients decided that the word *actionable* means practical or feasible and used the word in all his proposals. Unfortunately, the word *actionable* already has a widely used dictionary meaning: "just cause for a lawsuit."

### 10. Avoid prolix expressions for time, place, and relationship

Business and technical documents are never more long-winded and wordy than in expressing simple matters of time, space, distance, or sequence. *At this point in time* is one of 50 long-winded ways to say *now* or *currently*. Whole volumes of these replacements are in print, and many are incorporated into the grammar-checking programs of word processors. Just a few:

Instead of...	Use
three month interval of time	three months
located to the north of	north of
300 square meters of area	300 square meters
past history	history
midway between	between
by means of the utilization of	with
in regard to	about, regarding
visible to the eye	visible

## 11. Avoid nominalizations

When the text contains many words ending in *tion*, usually there are too many nominalizations, or verbs converted to nouns. These structures—sometimes called “smothered verbs”—not only lengthen and complicate a sentence but also produce confusing dictionary results. For the benefit of L2 and L3 readers, it is best to

Replace	With
furnish an explanation	explain
proffer an invitation to	invite
perform the installation of	install
conduct an inspection of	inspect
reach a conclusion	conclude
raise an objection regarding	object to
accomplish linkage with	link
implement a separation between	separate

## 12. Use standard grammar

A native speaker will make allowances for dangling constructions and misplaced modifiers. But an L2 or L3 may be baffled. Remember that English is one of the uninflected languages, relying more on word order than on grammatically meaningful word endings. (In fact, one of the few English inflections—*who* versus *whom*—is too hard for the average American speaker to learn.)

To internationalize your English, then, be especially wary of loosely connected (dangling) phrases at either the beginning or end of a sentence. Instead of “To ensure a wide market, ISO 9000 registration will be included in the plan.” Write “To ensure a wide market, we shall include ISO 9000 registration in the plan.”

Also be careful with the placement of modifiers. Instead of “The inspectors will *only* leave the site after all five tests” write “The inspectors will leave the site *only* after all five tests” or “The inspectors will stay on site *until* the last test is run.” (NOTE: Several languages have difficulty translating *until*.)

L2 readers are likely to have been drilled in school on the differences between *like* and *as*, the proper form of *effect* and *affect*, the conjugation of the verbs *lie* and *lay* and other

tricky parts of everyday English. The least that L1 writers can do is get their own grammar right!

### 13. Form words in standard ways

Be cautious of invalid formations like *administrate* (for *administer*) and *orientate* (for *orient*). Refrain from “verbing” nouns (even though that’s where many English verbs come from) and resist the temptation to form impossible words like *impactful*.

Just this week, a client told me that his company had been “cubicked”!

### 14. Beware of the several Englishes

Remember that there is more than one way to spell and punctuate English and there are even differences in grammar and meaning as we change from one English-speaking country to another. Americans use *company* as a singular, the British as a plural. Americans put all commas and periods inside closing quotation marks; the British only some. The verb *to table* has opposite meanings in America (postpone) and England (take up at once).

Again, it is useful to acquire the dictionaries and language guides used in your target countries. Most French or Chinese readers, for example, will have learned English from British teachers and texts; American writers may want to adjust some conventions.

### 15. Avoid illogical or arbitrary idioms

English is filled with odd constructions that confound the dictionary user. Even the most austere technical publications contain phrases that, on closer examination, prove to be unnecessarily hard to understand or translate. What, for example, will the international reader interpret in the phrase *run a risk*? Or *lose ground*? Or *bide one’s time*?

In English, for example,

*have a few things in common* = is similar to  
*have few things in common* = is dissimilar from

In the introduction to this article, I found myself writing *opportunities for misunderstanding*, but realized that, for L2 and L3, the interpretation of *opportunity* in this phrase is itself an opportunity for misunderstanding.

## 16. Avoid figurative language, especially sports and military images

Much of what gives mature, idiomatic English its color and flavor—figures, allusions, idiomatic expressions—is a problem for L2 and L3

For example, North American business and technical writing is overly fond of sports and military terms—most of which translate very badly. Be wary of *targets, missions, objectives, task forces, strategies, game plans, team approaches, full court presses, going on offense, and keying on the competition*; resist the temptation to *strike at, tackle, blitz, check, huddle with, or blast*.

To illustrate, many business people use the term *bail out* to mean abandon a project, using the image of a parachutist; sometimes they shorten this just to *bail*, as in “We decided to bail.” At the same time, other business writers use *bail out* to mean rescue an endangered company, using the nautical sense of the term; this is the understanding of the expression “government bailout.” Bail also has a technical meaning in the law, as well as in British sports. In short, it is a dangerously confusing term to use in an international document. (We’ll overlook the confusion with *bale*.)

All figurative language is potentially obscure. It is better to be *eager* than *keen*, *intelligent* rather than *sharp, fashionable* instead of *hot*. Literary allusions (like “the better part of valour”) will probably be lost, as will proverbs (“the last straw”).

In general, clichés that use figurative language will mystify the reader. Proposals and reports probably should be free of such expressions as *between a rock and a hard place* or *slipped through the cracks* or *the more the merrier*. And when such expressions are used, they should be used correctly: *bated breath* not *baited breath*.

## 17. Avoid regionalisms and slang

Aside from the obviously inappropriate regional slang expression (like “that dog won’t hunt”), there are also subtler regionalisms that may find their ways into formal business writing. For example, certain regions of the US and UK use the verb *reckon* to mean assess or appraise; it will translate poorly. Writers from New York often use the expression *kind of* for *somewhat*. British and Canadian writers will begin sentences with *mind you* instead of *of course*. Americans will overuse *basically* in much the way that British will overuse *actually*; in most cases these words can be removed without loss of meaning.

## 18. Avoid sarcasm, humor, wit, or irony

Unfortunately, nearly all forms of wordplay, cleverness, or literary allusion will distract or mislead the international reader. And although there is usually relatively little of such material in formal proposals and reports, it often creeps (unfortunate figure) into correspondence and short messages.

Sarcasm is baffling. I once made the mistake of writing: "There is no documentation for the telephone system. Fortunately, it's not used for any important messages." And my reader took me literally.

Sneering with quotation marks does not translate: "We read your 'long range' plan." And the most dangerous device of all is taking an already obscure cliché and altering it for humorous effect: between a rock and a lawsuit, skipped through the cracks, the more the messier, ...

## 19. Prefer simple sentences

Unfortunately, complex and complex-compound sentences are far more difficult to understand than simple and compound sentences. I say 'unfortunately' because as hard as it is to write an engaging analysis, conclusion, or recommendation without figures and idioms, it is extremely difficult write genuinely thoughtful or interesting passages without an occasional complex sentence.

A proposal or report written for an L2 audience will almost certainly sound choppy and a bit unsophisticated to L1 readers. The sentences will be shorter; there will be much less subordination and therefore much more repetition of key nouns; nearly all sentences will begin with the subject. (In fact, it will resemble the dull writing of typical undergraduates.)

As powerful, then, as sentences starting with *if* or *although* may be in most professional writing, there will be very few of them in international documents. Again, **by traditional standards, a well-written international English document is not always well written.**

## 20. Use optional words

Certain optional words in English make the logic of a sentence much clearer. International readers will have an easier time with sentences that *include* these extra words.

The most useful case is the optional *that*, as in "We predict **that** the cost will not change."

It is also useful to repeat words that are sometimes omitted in pairs, as in “The team will be ready to start work and *to* write the first report by December 1.”

And it is safer to repeat nouns than to point at them with pronouns like *this* or *these*; prefer *this X* or *that Y*.

## 21. Punctuate aggressively

There are two main styles of punctuation in America: the lean, spare method of journalists and copywriters versus the comma-rich style of scientists and academics.

If anything, English for international audiences should be over-punctuated, using every optional comma and putting hyphens into words that would not ordinarily require them. Instead of

As usual the Canadian, Mexican and Guatemalan subcommittees were the first to report.

Write

As usual, the Canadian, Mexican, and Guatemalan sub-committees were the first to report.

## 22. Use more accessible layout

Unless advised otherwise, use lots of white space. A 4½ or 5-inch column of text is far more likely to be read with understanding than a 6½ or 7-inch column. Prefer readable, proportional typefaces with good x-heights. (The Times New Roman font is a good choice for electronically shared documents, because nearly everyone has it. But it is far from the most readable typeface.)

To the extent possible, reduce GOTOs (sending readers to other pages) in the text, being mindful of where pages break and always trying to put figures and exhibits either close to their mention in the text—preferably the same page or on a facing page.

## 23. Prefer lists to paragraphs

Long sentences and paragraphs intimidate all readers, and especially L2 and L3. When proposals or reports contain items or steps in a process the material is far more understandable in list form.

Instead of

In evaluating alternative offerors, please consider that our company has 15 years' experience in the construction of oil and gas pipelines. We hold the patents on the most advanced pumping technology. Further, we maintain business offices in all the major Middle Eastern capitals.

Write

In evaluating alternative offerors, please consider that our company

- Has 15 years' experience in the construction of oil and gas pipelines
- Holds the patents on the most advanced pumping technology
- Maintains business offices in all the major Middle Eastern capitals.

#### 24. Prefer tables to prose

In most cultures, a simple table will be far easier to follow than a paragraph.

Instead of

New users should open the Maintenance Menu and select Setup. Also, old users may select Setup from the Maintenance Menu if they want to change their Preferences. Old users who don't want to change their setup in any way should go to the File menu and select either New or Open (for existing file).

Prefer:

<i>User</i>	<i>Menu</i>	<i>Select . . .</i>
New User	Maintenance	<b>Setup</b>
User Wanting to Change Preferences	Maintenance	<b>Setup</b>
Other Users	File	<b>New</b> (new file) OR <b>Open</b> (existing file)

## 25. Be extremely polite

American business communication tends to be more informal than that in other countries. International documents will travel better if they are polite and formal: no first names, no contractions, no nonstandard spelling or punctuation . . . Avoid the easy intimacy that is an American cultural trait.

### Adapting to Local Cultures

Generally, the tactics above are meant to remove burdens, distractions and difficulties from international proposals and reports. But no document is really ready for foreign readers until it has been reviewed by someone Richard Brislin<sup>3</sup> calls the “cultural informant” — a representative of the intended nation or community, a person who can alert the writers not only to minor errors and omissions in the tactics above, but also to subtle and important cultural issues.

Ultimately, editing a document for ease and clarity, *removing* its unnecessary difficulties and cultural peculiarities, is much easier than adapting it to local expectations, *adding* elements that will make it more familiar, meaningful, and engaging to your readers. (Nancy Hoft<sup>4</sup> calls this “radical localization.”)

The effort needed to research the culture of our readers, as well as the cost of acquiring cultural informants, may seem high at first. But in a world of global commerce, it is a sound investment.

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<sup>3</sup> *Understanding Culture's Influence on Behavior*, New York; Harcourt Brace, 1993, Chapter 7

<sup>4</sup> *International Technical Communication*, New York; Wiley, 1995, Chapter 2

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**The Elements of International English Style: A Guide to Writing Correspondence, Reports, Technical Documents, and Internet Pages for a Global Audience**

Authored by: Edmond H. Weiss

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**Description:** This easy-to-use handbook is an essential resource for anyone who needs to write English correspondence and other documents for an international business audience. In an engaging, accessible style it integrates the theory and controversies of intercultural communication with the practical skills of writing and editing English for those who read it as a second language.

The book emphasizes principles of simplicity and clarity, proper etiquette, cultural sensitivity, appropriate layout and typography and more, and thus will increase the chances that texts prepared by native English speakers will be properly understood by non-native speakers. Equally useful for students and professionals, *The Elements of International English Style* updates traditional advice with new insights into "e-mail culture." The book is filled with realistic examples, problems, and projects.

- Fifty seven specific tactics to internationalize one's English;
- Hundreds of before-and-after comparisons showing the positive effects of editing for an international audience;
- Models of international correspondence, including e-mail;
- Practical discussion questions and work projects;
- Useful resources including a checklist for internationalizing your website.

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**Comment(s):** "In this succinct, practical, and well thought through book, Edmond Weiss presents us with a comprehensive set of strategies and tactics for using a basic form of English, for ensuring clarity, for reducing the burden and stress placed on readers, and for developing effective, culturally adapted correspondence for a variety of practical situations. ... This book would serve as an invaluable desk aid for anyone involved in writing for diverse, global audiences. It would work equally well as a college text to help prepare the next generation of captains of industry to compete effectively in the

business world they will be entering." -- *Roger A. Grice, PhD, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*

"This book is not merely a presentation of information, but has a personable, witty, literate, and, yes, even literary voice. Not only did that make the book a more enjoyable read, but it also made me trust the author more on the issues of style that are the subject of the book." -- *Elizabeth Porto, University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

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"With the publication of *The Elements of International English Style*, Dr. Edmond Weiss has provided writers a *Strunk and White* for the 21st century and the Internet. He does this through a stimulating presentation of coherent principles -- simplicity, clarity, correspondence, cultural adaptation; through rules of usage presented as 57 tactics for writers; and through numerous helpful examples and illustrations. Writers of English in a global environment have a wise and valuable guide and resource in Dr. Weiss and his book." -- *Michael B. Goodman, Fairleigh Dickinson University*

"... a wonderful addition to the cross-cultural and international business communication literature. In a succinct, personable style, Weiss gets to the underlying stumbling blocks to effective global communication and provides a guide to the 'road less traveled' of clarity and comprehensibility. Despite the colorless character of correctly written 'International English,' the return of being able to transcend geographical, linguistic, and cultural barriers makes the effort well worthwhile." -- *Joel Weaver, Director, Intercultural Communications College*

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**Review(s):** *The Elements of International English Style* manages to carve out another niche in the ongoing quest for global understanding--a not unremarkable achievement. ... a useful reference avoiding specific linguistic and cultural minefields. ... reading

Weiss' book should heighten one's international cultural sensitivity. *International Association of Business Communications*

The Elements of International English Style manages to carve out another niche in the ongoing quest for global understanding--a not unremarkable achievement. ...reading Weiss' book should heighten one's international cultural sensitivity. *Communications World*

Weiss has done a good job of assembling practical, general advice on communicating across cultures. *Technical Communication, Vol.52, No.4*

...concise...straightforward, and witty. ...Weiss...is deeply aware of the many complex issues which come forward when thinking about English in an international environment. ...it is its appreciation for style and nuance that makes this work an excellent one. ...a necessary reference... anyone who deals with E@S in any environment should read this book. *Interface: The Journal for Education, Community, and Values*