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# HANDBOOK OF TECHNICAL WRITING

Ninth Edition

Gerald J. Alred  
Charles T. Brusaw  
Walter E. Oliu



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## The Five-Way Access System

The five-way access system of the *Handbook of Technical Writing* provides readers with multiple ways of retrieving information:

### 1. Alphabetically Organized Entries

The alphabetically organized entries with color tabs enable readers to find information quickly. Within the entries, terms shown as links refer to other entries that contain definitions of key concepts or further information on related topics.

### 2. Contents by Topic

The complete Contents by Topic, on the inside front cover, groups the entries into categories and serves as a quick reference for finding all topics covered in the book. The Contents by Topic allows a writer focusing on a specific task or problem to locate helpful entries; it is also useful for instructors who want to correlate the *Handbook* with standard textbooks or their own course materials. The list of Commonly Misused Words and Phrases extends this topical key by listing all the usage entries in the book.

### 3. Checklist of the Writing Process

The Checklist helps readers to reference all writing-process-related entries.

### 4. Comprehensive Index

The Index lists all the topics covered in the book, including subtopics within the main entries in the alphabetical arrangement.

### 5. Model Documents and Figures by Topic

The list of Model Documents and Figures by Topic, on the inside back cover, makes it easier to find the abundant “real-world” examples and sample documents throughout the text that provide models for effective technical communication.

## Contents by Topic

Use this list as a quick reference for finding entries by topic. To search this book in more detail, see the Index.

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## About the Authors

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**Charles T. Brusaw** was a faculty member at NCR Corporation’s Management College, where he developed and taught courses in professional writing, editing, and presentation skills for the corporation worldwide. Previously, he worked in advertising, technical writing, and public relations. He has been a communications consultant, an invited speaker at academic conferences, and a teacher of business writing at Sinclair Community College.

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# Handbook of Technical Writing

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Ninth Edition

# Handbook of Technical Writing

Gerald J. Alred

Charles T. Brusaw

Walter E. Oliu

Bedford/St. Martin's

Boston ◆ New York



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## Preface

Like previous editions, the ninth edition of the *Handbook of Technical Writing* is a comprehensive, easy-access guide to all aspects of technical communication in the classroom and on the job. It places writing in a real-world context with quick reference to hundreds of business writing topics and scores of model documents and visuals. Meeting the needs of today's writers, the ninth edition includes expanded coverage of audience and context and reflects the impact that e-mail and other technology have had on workplace communication. This comprehensive reference tool is accompanied by a robust Web site that works together with the text to offer expanded resources online.

### Helpful Features

The ESL Tips boxes throughout the book offer special advice for multilingual writers. In addition, the Contents by Topic on the inside front cover includes a list of entries—ESL Trouble Spots—that may be of particular interest to nonnative speakers of English.

Digital Tips and Web Links boxes direct readers to specific, related resources on the companion Web site. The Digital Tips in the book suggest ways to use technology to simplify complex writing tasks, such as incorporating track changes and creating styles and templates. Expanded Digital Tips on the Web site offer step-by-step instructions for completing each task. Web Links in the book point students to related resources on the companion site, such as model documents, tutorials, and links to hundreds of useful, related Web sites.

Ethics Notes throughout the text highlight the ethical concerns of today's technical writers and offer advice for dealing with these concerns. A thorough discussion of copyright and plagiarism clarifies what plagiarism is in the digital age and highlights the ethical aspects of using and documenting sources appropriately.

### New to This Edition

As mentioned above, our focus in revising the *Handbook* for this edition has been to address the impact that technology has had on workplace communication. We have updated our coverage of correspondence and other entries throughout the book to show that there is often more than one appropriate medium for a particular message. A report, for example, can be sent as a hard copy, an e-mail attachment, or an



e-mail itself. To address this issue, we have expanded our rhetorical advice on analyzing context and audience and have added new information on instant messaging, blogs, and other means by which today's writers communicate. We have also thoroughly updated coverage of grammar, usage, and style, and have made the following additional improvements:

- **Expanded coverage of the latest types of writing for the Web** discusses FAQs and blogs as forms of collaborative writing and promotion. A new entry on content management suggests how writers can use this technology to electronically access, share, and revise a wide variety of digital forms.
- **New information on environmental-impact statements** reflects current environmental policy and ethics. Covering the scope, language, and organization of these statements, the new entry features a link to the Environmental Protection Agency Web site and a full-length example.
- **A new entry on repurposing** explains how writers can use content for multiple purposes and audiences by adapting it for different contexts and mediums.
- **Detailed job-search entries** discuss social-networking Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook and their relationship to current job-search issues.
- **Updated coverage of research and documentation** helps students find, use, and integrate sources effectively in their writing. Real-world documentation models and a visual guide to citing sources make this challenging topic more accessible.
- **Updated Digital Tips** throughout the book focus on using technology to assist with a variety of writing tasks, such as using wikis for collaborative documents and conducting meetings from remote locations.
- **New and updated sample documents and visuals** reflect the prominence of e-mail in the workplace. Other updated visuals include charts, graphs, drawings, tables, internationally recognized symbols, illustrated descriptions and instructions, brochure and newsletter pages, presentation slides, and more.
- **An updated companion Web site at [bedfordstmartins.com/alredtech](http://bedfordstmartins.com/alredtech)** helps instructors take advantage of the *Handbook's* potential as a text for face-to-face, online, or hybrid classes by offering lesson plans, handouts, teaching tips, and assignment ideas. For students, the Web site includes additional sample documents, useful tutorials, expanded Digital Tips, and links to hundreds of useful Web sites keyed to the *Handbook's* main entries.

## How to Use This Book

The *Handbook of Technical Writing* is made up of alphabetically organized entries with color tabs. Within each entry, underlined cross-references such as “**formal reports**” link readers to related entries that contain further information. Many entries present advice and guidelines in the form of convenient Writer’s Checklists.

The *Handbook’s* alphabetical organization enables readers to find specific topics quickly and easily; however, readers with general questions will discover several alternate ways to find information in the book and on its companion Web site at [bedfordstmartins.com/alredtech](http://bedfordstmartins.com/alredtech).

- **Contents by Topic.** The complete Contents by Topic on the inside front cover groups the alphabetical entries into topic categories. This topical key can help a writer focusing on a specific task or problem browse all related entries; it is also useful for instructors who want to correlate the *Handbook* with standard textbooks or their own course materials.
- **Commonly Misused Words and Phrases.** The list of Commonly Misused Words and Phrases on pages 627–28 extends the Contents by Topic by listing all the usage entries, which appear in *italics* throughout the book.
- **Model Documents and Figures by Topic.** The topically organized list of model documents and figures on the inside back cover makes it easier to browse the book’s most commonly referenced sample documents and visuals to find specific examples of technical communication genres.
- **Checklist of the Writing Process.** The checklist on pages xxiii–xxiv helps readers reference key entries in a sequence useful for planning and carrying out a writing project.
- **Comprehensive Index.** The Index lists all the topics covered in the book, including subtopics within the main entries in the alphabetical arrangement.

## Acknowledgments

For their invaluable comments and suggestions for this edition of *Handbook of Technical Writing*, we thank the following reviewers who responded to our questionnaire: Dana Anderson, Indiana University, Bloomington; Daniel Ding, Ferris State University; Daniel Fitzstephens, University of Colorado; Karen Griggs, Indiana University–Purdue University, Fort Wayne; Lila M. Harper, Central Washington University; Douglas Jerolimov, University of Virginia; John F. Lee, University of Texas at San Antonio; Joseph P. McCallus, Columbus State University; Barbara J. McCleary, University of Hartford; Laura Osborne, Stephen

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G. J. A.  
C. T. B.  
W. E. O.



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## Five Steps to Successful Writing

Successful writing on the job is not the product of inspiration, nor is it merely the spoken word converted to print; it is the result of knowing how to structure information using both text and design to achieve an intended purpose for a clearly defined audience. The best way to ensure that your writing will succeed—whether it is in the form of a memo, a résumé, a proposal, or a Web page—is to approach writing using the following steps:

1. Preparation
2. Research
3. Organization
4. Writing
5. Revision

You will very likely need to follow those steps consciously—even self-consciously—at first. The same is true the first time you use new software, interview a candidate for a job, or chair a committee meeting. With practice, the steps become nearly automatic. That is not to suggest that writing becomes easy. It does not. However, the easiest and most efficient way to write effectively is to do it systematically.

As you master the five steps, keep in mind that they are interrelated and often overlap. For example, your readers' needs and your purpose, which you determine in step 1, will affect decisions you make in subsequent steps. You may also need to retrace steps. When you conduct research, for example, you may realize that you need to revise your initial understanding of the document's purpose and audience. Similarly, when you begin to organize, you may discover the need to return to the research step to gather more information.

The time required for each step varies with different writing tasks. When writing an informal memo, for example, you might follow the first three steps (preparation, research, and organization) by simply listing the points in the order you want to cover them. In such situations, you gather and organize information in your mind as you consider your purpose and audience. For a formal report, the first three steps require well-organized research, careful note-taking, and detailed outlining. For a routine e-mail message to a coworker, the first four steps merge as you type the information onto the screen. In short, the five steps expand, contract, and at times must be repeated to fit the complexity or context of the writing task.

Dividing the writing process into steps is especially useful for collaborative writing, in which you typically divide work among team members, keep track of a project, and save time by not duplicating effort. For details on collaborating with others and using electronic tools to help you manage the process, see **collaborative writing**.\*

## Preparation

Writing, like most professional tasks, requires solid **preparation**. In fact, adequate preparation is as important as writing a draft. In preparation for writing, your goal is to accomplish the following four major tasks:

- Establish your primary purpose.
- Assess your audience (or readers) and the context.
- Determine the scope of your coverage.
- Select the appropriate medium.

**Establishing Your Purpose.** To establish your primary **purpose** simply ask yourself what you want your readers to know, to believe, or to be able to do after they have finished reading what you have written. Be precise. Often a writer states a purpose so broadly that it is almost useless. A purpose such as “to report on possible locations for a new research facility” is too general. However, “to compare the relative advantages of Paris, Singapore, and San Francisco as possible locations for a new research facility so that top management can choose the best location” is a purpose statement that can guide you throughout the writing process. In addition to your primary purpose, consider possible secondary purposes for your document. For example, a secondary purpose of the research-facilities report might be to make corporate executive readers aware of the staffing needs of the new facility so that they can ensure its smooth operation regardless of the location selected.

**Assessing Your Audience and Context.** The next task is to assess your **audience**. Again, be precise and ask key questions. Who exactly is your reader? Do you have multiple readers? Who needs to see or to use the document? What are your readers’ needs in relation to your subject? What are their attitudes about the subject? (Skeptical? Supportive? Anxious? Bored?) What do your readers already know about the subject? Should you define basic terminology, or will such definitions merely bore, or even impede, your readers? Are you communicating with international readers and therefore dealing with issues inherent in **global communication**?

\*In this discussion, as elsewhere throughout this book, words and phrases underlined and set in an alternate typeface refer to specific alphabetical entries.

For the research-facilities report, the readers are described as “top management.” Who is included in that category? Will one of the people evaluating the report be the Human Resources Manager? If so, that person likely would be interested in the availability of qualified professionals as well as in the presence of training, housing, and perhaps even recreational facilities available to potential employees in each city. The Purchasing Manager would be concerned about available sources for materials needed by the facility. The Marketing Manager would give priority to the facility’s proximity to the primary markets for its products and services and the transportation options that are available. The Chief Financial Officer would want to know about land and building costs and about each country’s tax structure. The Chief Executive Officer would be interested in all this information and perhaps more. As with this example, many workplace documents have audiences composed of multiple readers. You can accommodate their needs through one of a number of approaches described in the entry [audience](#).

In addition to knowing the needs and interests of your readers, learn as much as you can about the [context](#). Simply put, context is the environment or circumstances in which writers produce documents and within which readers interpret their meanings. Everything is written in a context, as illustrated in many entries and examples throughout this book. To determine the effect of context on the research-facilities report, you might ask both specific and general questions about the situation and about your readers’ backgrounds: Is this the company’s first new facility, or has the company chosen locations for new facilities before? Have the readers visited all three cities? Have they already seen other reports on the three cities? What is the corporate culture in which your readers work, and what are its key values? What specific factors,

#### ESL TIPS for Considering Audiences

In the United States, [conciseness](#), [coherence](#), and [clarity](#) characterize good writing. Make sure readers can follow your writing, and say only what is necessary to communicate your message. Of course, no writing style is inherently better than another, but to be a successful writer in any language, you must understand the cultural values that underlie the language in which you are writing. See also [awkwardness](#), [copyright](#), [global communication](#), [English as a second language](#), and [plagiarism](#).

Throughout this book we have included ESL Tips boxes like this one with information that may be particularly helpful to nonnative speakers of English. See the Contents by Topic on the inside front cover for listings of ESL Tips and ESL Trouble Spots, entries that may be of particular help to ESL writers.



- [\*The Road Less Travelled: 1,000 Amazing Places Off the Tourist Trail. Foreword by Bill Bryson \(Eyewitness Travel Guides\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)\*](#)
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