

# Engineers and Writing

# 1

Like a lot of other professionals, many engineers and engineering students dislike writing. After all, don't you go into engineering because you want to work with machines, instruments, and numbers rather than words? Didn't you leave writing behind when you finished English 101? You may have hoped so, but the fact remains—as the above quotes so bluntly indicate—that to be a successful engineer you must be able to write (and speak) effectively. Even if you could set up your own lab in a vacuum and avoid communication with all others, what good would your ideas and discoveries be if they never got beyond your own mind?

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## Note

Engineering students devote less than 5% of their engineering studies to communication skills. Practicing engineers devote 20–40% of their working time to communication.

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If you personally feel you haven't mastered writing skills in college, the fault probably is not entirely yours. Few engineering colleges offer adequate (if any) three courses in engineering communication, and many students find what writing skills they did possess are badly rusted from lack of use by the time they graduate with an engineering degree. Ironically, most engineering programs devote less than 5% of their curriculum to communication skills—the very skills that many engineers will use some 20% to 40% of their working time. Even this percentage usually increases with promotion, which is why many young engineers eventually find themselves wishing they had taken more writing courses.

But rather than dwell on the negative, look at the needs and opportunities that exist in engineering writing, and then see how you can best remove barriers to becoming an efficient and effective writer. You'll soon find that the skills you need to write well are no harder to acquire than many of the technical skills you have already mastered as an engineer or engineering student. First, here are four factors to consider:

- Engineers write a lot.
- Engineers write many kinds of documents.
- Successful engineering careers require strong writing skills.
- Engineers can learn to write well.

### Instant learning?

Researchers at Boston University and ATR Computational Neuroscience Laboratories in Kyoto, Japan, think that by using decoded neurofeedback, people's brain activity can be trained to match that of someone who possesses a certain skill (for example, writing or piano playing). Don't we wish!

For details, see this chapter's "Additional Study Resources" in the ebook or from the book companion site.

## Engineers Write a Lot

Many engineers spend over 40% of their work time writing, and usually find the percentage increases as they move up the corporate ladder. It doesn't matter that most of this writing is now sent through email; the need for clear and efficient prose is the same whether it appears on a computer or sheet of paper.

An engineer told us some years ago that while working on the B-1b bomber, he and his colleagues calculated that all the proposals, regulations, manuals, procedures, and memos that the project generated weighed almost as much as the bomber itself. Most large ships carry several tons of maintenance and operations manuals. Two trucks were needed to carry the proposals from Texas to Washington for the ill-fated supercollider project. John Naisbitt estimated in his book *Megatrends* over 25 years ago that some 6,000 to 7,000 scientific articles were being written every day, and even then the amount of recorded scientific and technical information in the world was doubling every five and a half years. Jumping to the present, look what John Bringardner has to say in his short article entitled "Winning the Lawsuit":

*Way back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Ford Motor Company was sued over a faulty ignition switch, its lawyers would gird for the discovery process: a labor-intensive ordeal that involved disgorging thousands of pages of company records. These days, the number of pages commonly involved in commercial litigation discovery has ballooned into the billions. Attorneys on the hunt for a smoking gun now want to see not just the final engineering plans but the emails, drafts, personal data files, and everything else ever produced in the lead-up to the finished product.*

*Wired Magazine, July 2008, p. 112.*

Who generates and transmits—in print, online, graphically, or orally—all this material, together with countless memos, reports, proposals, manuals, and other technical information? Engineers. Perhaps they get some help from a technical editor if their company employs one, and secretaries may play a part in some cases. Nevertheless, the vast body of technical information available in the world today has its genesis in the writing and speaking of engineers, whether they work alone or in teams. Figure 1-1 shows just one response we got when we randomly asked an engineer friend, who works as a software deployment specialist for a large international company, to outline a typical day at his job (our italics indicate where communication skills are called for).

The ability to write effectively is not just a "nice-to-have"; it translates into significant dollars. If the average starting salary for engineers in 2018 is \$85,000 and those engineers spend 40% of their time writing, that means they are being paid \$34,000 a year to write!

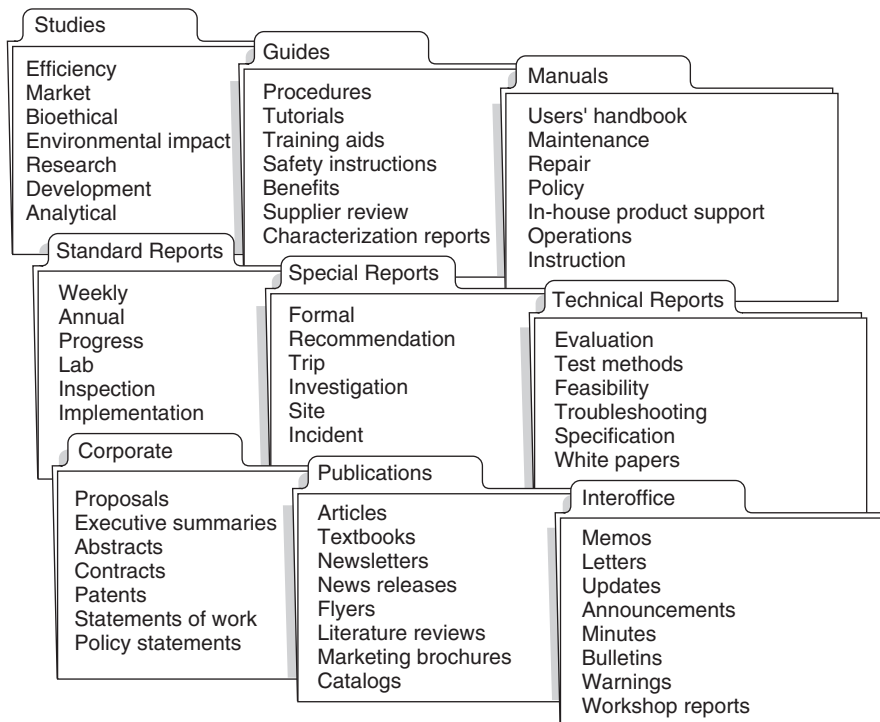
## Engineers Write Many Kinds of Documents

As mentioned above, few engineers work in a vacuum. Throughout your career, you will interact with a variety of other engineering and nonengineering colleagues, officials, and members of the public. Even if you don't do the actual engineering work, you may have to explain how something was done, should be done, needs to be changed, must be investigated, and so on. The list of all possible engineering situations and contexts in which communication skills are needed is unending. Figure 1-2 identifies just some of the documents you might be involved in producing during your engineering career. (Not all companies label reports by the same name or put them in the same categories as we have.)

Moving further into the twenty-first century, electronic communication is rapidly replacing much hard copy. Used for anything from quick pithy notes and memos to complete multivolume

Friday's Schedule 2/15/08	
7:30	Arrive, read, and reply to several overnight emails.
8:00	Work on project.
10:30	Meet with project manager to write answer to department head request.
11:00	Write up a request to obtain needed technical support.
11:30	Lunch.
12:00	Meet with server group about submitted application to fix process problems.
12:20	Reply to emails from Sales about prospective customers' technical questions.
12:30	Write to software vendor about how our product works with their plans.
1:00	Give presentation to server hosting group to explain what my group is doing.
2:00	Join the team to write up weekly progress report.
2:30	Write emails to update customers on the status of solving their problems.
2:45	Write email reply to question about knowledge base article I wrote.
3:00	Meet with group to discuss project goals for next four months.
3:30	Meet with group to create presentation of findings to project management.
4:00	Work on project.
5:00	Leave for the day.

**FIGURE 1-1**  
The working day of a typical engineer calls for plenty of communication skills.



**FIGURE 1-2**  
Throughout their careers, engineers write many kinds of documents in various contexts and with different purposes and audiences.

documents, email has perhaps become the most popular form of written communication. Yet this fact does not in any way change the need for clarity and organization in engineering writing, and whatever the future holds, solid skills in clear and efficient writing, and the ability to adapt to many different document specifications, will probably be necessary for as long as humans communicate with each other.

## Successful Engineering Careers Require Strong Writing Skills

In the engineering field, you are rarely judged solely by the quality of your technical expertise or work. People also form opinions of you by what you say and write—and how you say and write it. When you write email or reports, talk to members of a group, deal with vendors on the phone, or attend meetings, the image others get of you is largely formed by how well you communicate. Even if you work for a large company and don't see a lot of high-level managers, those same managers can still gain an impression of you by the quality of your written reports as well as by what your immediate supervisor tells them. Thus Robert W. Lucky, former Executive Director of AT&T Laboratories and head of research at Telcordia Technologies, and an accomplished writer himself, points out:

*It is unquestionably true that writing and speaking abilities are essential to the successful engineer. Nearly every engineer who has been unsuccessful in my division had poor communication skills. That does not necessarily mean that they failed because of the lack of these skills, but it does provide strong contributory evidence of the need for good communication. On the contrary, I have seen many quite average engineers be successful because of above-average communication skills.*

r lucky@telcordia.com Accessed August 20, 2008

Moreover, two relatively recent trends are now making communication skills even more vital to the engineering profession. These are *specialization* and *accountability*. Due to the advancement and specialization of technology, engineers are finding it increasingly difficult to communicate with one another. Almost daily, engineering fields once considered unified become progressively fragmented, and it's quite possible for two engineers with similar academic degrees to have large knowledge gaps when it comes to each other's work. In practical terms, this means that a fellow engineer may have only a little more understanding of what you are working on than does a layperson. These gaps in knowledge often have to be bridged, but they can't be unless specialists have the skills to communicate clearly and effectively with each other. (Chapter 3 presents "translation" techniques that can help with these gaps as well.)

In addition, because engineers and their companies are now held much more accountable by the public, engineers must also be able to communicate with government, news media, and the general public. As the Director of the Center for Engineering Professionalism at Texas Tech University puts it,

*The expansiveness of technology is such that now, more than ever, society is holding engineering professionals accountable for decisions that affect a full range of daily life activities. Engineers are now responsible for saying: "Can we do it, should we do it, if we do it, can we control it, and are we willing to be accountable for it?" There have been too many "headline type" instances of technology gone astray for it to be otherwise . . . Pinto automobiles that burn when hit from the rear, DC-10s that crash when cargo doors don't hold, bridges that collapse, Hyatt Regency walkways that fall, space shuttles that explode on*

*national TV, gas leaks that kill thousands, nuclear plant accidents, computer viruses, oil tanker spills, and on and on.*

Engineering Ethics Module,  
Murdough Center for Engineering Professionalism,  
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.  
[www.murdough.ttu.edu/EthicsModule/EthicsModule.htm](http://www.murdough.ttu.edu/EthicsModule/EthicsModule.htm).  
Accessed December 13, 2011.

People do want to know *why* a space shuttle crashed (after all, their taxes paid for the mission). They want to know if it really is safe to live near a nuclear reactor or high-power lines. The public—often through the press—wants to know if a plant is environmentally sound or if a project is likely to be worth the tax dollars. Moreover, there is no shortage of lawyers ready to hold engineering firms and projects accountable for their actions. All this means that engineers are being called upon to explain themselves in numerous ways and must now communicate with an increasing variety of people—many of whom are not engineers.

## Engineers Can Learn to Write Well

Here are the words of Norman Augustine, former chairman and CEO of Martin Marietta Corporation and also chair of the National Academy of Engineering:

*Living in a “sound bite” world, engineers must learn to communicate effectively. In my judgment, this remains the greatest shortcoming of most engineers today—particularly insofar as written communication is concerned. It is not sensible to continue to place our candle under a bushel as we too often have in the past. If we put our trust solely in the primacy of logic and technical skills, we will lose the contest for the public’s attention—and in the end, both the public and the engineer will be the loser.*

Norman R. Augustine, in *The Bridge*, The National Academy of Engineering, 24(3), Fall 1994, p. 13.

Writing is not easy for most of us; it takes practice just like programming, woodworking, or playing the bagpipes, for example. A lot of truth lies in the adage that no one can be a good writer—only a good *rewriter*. If you look at the early drafts of the most famous authors’ works, you will see scribbling, additions, deletions, rewordings, and corrections where they have edited their text. So don’t expect to produce a masterpiece of writing on your first try. Every initial draft of a document, whether it’s a one-page memo or a 50-page set of procedures, needs to be worked on and improved before being sent to its readers.

As an engineer you have been trained to think logically. In the laboratory or workshop, you are concerned with precision and accuracy. From elementary and secondary school, you already possess the skills needed for basic written communication, and every day you are exposed to clear writing in newspapers, weekly news magazines, and popular journal articles. Thus, you are already in a good position to become an effective writer partly by emulating what you’ve already been exposed to. All you need is some instruction and practice. This book will give you plenty of the former, and your engineering career will give you many opportunities for the latter.

## Noise and the Communication Process

Have you ever been annoyed by someone talking loudly on a cell phone while you were trying to study or talk to a friend? Or maybe you couldn’t enjoy your favorite TV show because someone was using the vacuum cleaner in the next room or the stereo was booming.

In each case, what you were experiencing was noise interfering with the transmission of information—specifically, *environmental* noise. In written communication, we are primarily concerned with *syntactic* (grammar), *semantic* (word meanings), and *organizational* noise.

Whenever a message is sent, someone is sending it and someone else is trying to receive it. In communication theory, the sender is the *encoder*, and the receiver is the *decoder*. The message, or *signal*, is sent through a channel, usually speech, writing, or some other conventional set of signs. Anything that prevents the signal from flowing clearly through the channel from the encoder to the decoder is *noise*. Figure 1-3 illustrates this concept. Note how all our actions involving communication are “overshadowed” by the possibility of noise.

Apply this concept to engineering writing: anything causing a reader to hesitate—whether in uncertainty, frustration, or even unintended amusement—is noise. Chapter 2 will provide more detail, but for now the following box shows just a few simple samples of written noise.

### NOISY SENTENCES

When they bought the machine they werent aware of it's shortcomings.

They were under the allusion that the project could be completed in six weeks.

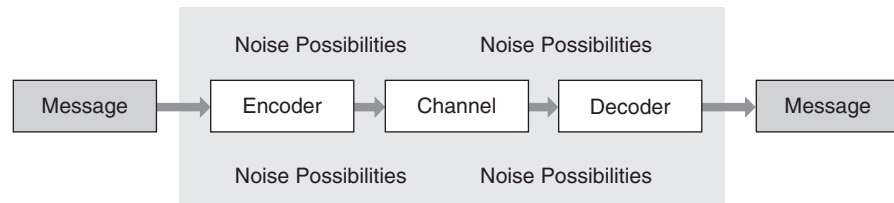
There was not a sufficient enough number of samples to validate the data.

Our intention is to implement the verification of the reliability of the system in the near future.

In the first sentence, two apostrophe problems cause noise. A reader might be distracted momentarily from the sentence's message (or at least waste time wondering about the writer). The same might be said for the confusion between *allusion* and *illusion* in the second sentence. The third sentence is noisy because of the wordiness it contains. Wouldn't you rather just read *There weren't enough samples to validate the data?* The final example is a monument to verbosity. With the noise removed, it simply says: *We want to verify the system's reliability soon.*

Noise in a written document can cause anything from momentary confusion to a complete inability to understand a message. However, noise inevitably costs money—or to put it graphically,

NOISE = \$\$\$\$



**FIGURE 1-3** In noise-free technical communication, the signal flows from the encoder (writer, speaker) to the decoder (reader, listener) without distortion or ambiguity. When this occurs, the received message is a reliable version of the sent one.

According to engineer Bill Brennan, a senior member of the technical staff at Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) in Austin, Texas, it costs a minimum of \$200 to produce one page of an internal technical report and at least five times that much for one page of a technical conference report. Thus, as you learn to reduce noise in your writing, you will become an increasingly valuable asset to your company.

Noise can also occur in spoken communication, of course, as you will see in Chapter 9. For now, recall how often you've been distracted by a speaker's monotonous tone, nervous cough, clumsy use of notes, or indecipherable graphics—while you just sat there, a captive audience.

The following chapters contain advice, illustrations, and strategies to help you learn to avoid noise in your communication. Try to keep this concept of noise in mind when you write or edit, whether you are working on a five-sentence memo or a 500-page technical manual. Throughout your school years, you may have been reprimanded for “poor writing,” “mistakes,” “errors,” “choppy style,” and so on. However, as an engineer, think of these problems in terms of *noise to be eliminated from the signal*. For efficient and effective communication to take place, the signal-to-noise ratio must be as high as possible. To put it another way, filter as much noise out of your communication as you can.

## Controlling the Writing System

Engineers frequently design, build, and manage systems made up of interconnected parts. Controls have to be built into such systems to guarantee that they function correctly and reliably and that they produce the desired result. If the ATM chews up your card and spits it back out to you in place of the \$200 you had hoped for, you'd claim the system is not working right—or that it is out of control. The system is only functioning reliably if the input (your ATM card) produces the desired output (your \$200).

What has this got to do with writing? Consider language as a *system* made up of various components such as sounds, words, clauses, sentences, and so on. Whenever we speak or write, we use this system, and like other systems, it must be controlled if it is to do its job right. The person who supposedly wrote in an accident report, *Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I didn't have*, was obviously unable to express what really happened. The input (thought) to the system (language) did not have the desired output (meaning) because the writer was not in control of the system or was not thinking clearly.

In the same way, an instruction like *Pour the concrete when it is above 40°F* indicates a lack of language control since the writer is not clearly stating whether the concrete or the weather must meet the specification of “above 40°F.” Thus, you might think of language as a system or even a tool you can learn to control so that it will do exactly what you want it to. Learning to control language, namely to write and speak so you get desired results or feedback, is really not much different than training yourself to operate complex machinery or software systems. You can train yourself to eliminate most, if not all, noise that might occur in your writing and speaking. Figure 1-4 depicts how this works. Note how at the end of the process, your communication often receives “feedback.” Feedback—in the form of questions and puzzled looks, for example—gives you an indication of how well you are using the language system.

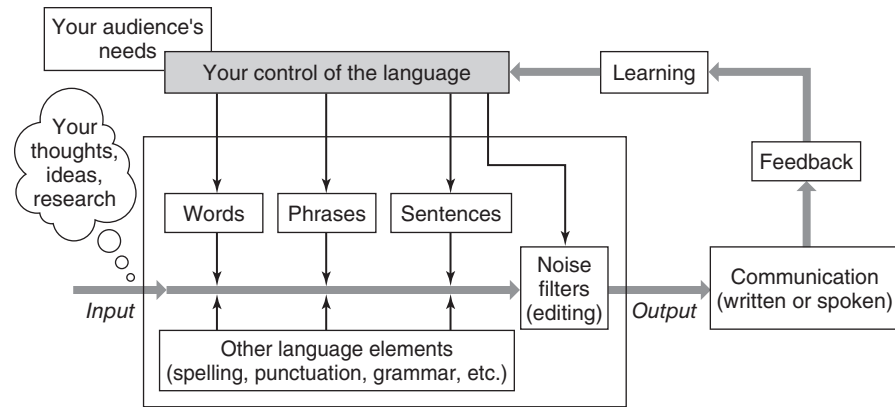
### Brain power

Freer Logic has developed a device called Body Wave that, when coupled with an interactive software package called *Play Attention*, provides interactive feedback and training toward peak mental performance—in particular, the ability to control a computer with your brain.

For details, see this chapter's “Additional Study Resources,” in the e-book or from the book companion site.

**FIGURE 1-4**

The process of communicating can be illustrated as a system with an input and output. How well the input is processed once it is in the system, i.e., how well you convey your information to others, determines the impact of your message. From the response (feedback) you get, you learn how to further improve the process.



If you get the response (or feedback) you want from your communication, you can be pretty sure you have communicated well. A proposal accepted, a repair quickly made, an applied-for promotion awarded—these are just a few examples of the payback from effective communication. To put it another way, if you learn to efficiently control the tool you are using (language) so that it's noise-free, you will produce clear and effective written documents that get results.

## EXERCISES

- Ask any professional engineers about the amount and kinds of writing they do on the job. How much time do they spend writing each day? Is the amount of writing they do related to how long they have been with their company? In what ways have their writing skills helped (or hindered) them in their careers? Do they get any help with their writing from secretaries, peers, or technical writers? What is the attitude of their superiors toward clear writing?
- Look at the list of technical documents in Figure 1-2. How many are you familiar with? When would they likely be important to you as a reader? Are there other types of documents not included in Figure 1-2? Ask some engineering friends how many kinds of documents they have worked on, either as individuals or as part of a group.
- Think of your own engineering major or specialty. List some engineering fields related in varying degrees of closeness to yours. What knowledge do you share with people in these fields? What problems can you foresee in communicating with engineers in other fields? What problems would you face if you had to talk about your field to a non-engineering audience?

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

For each of the following questions, select the best answer according to this chapter of *Guide to Writing as an Engineer*.

- How much time do practicing engineers spend writing?
  - 5–10%
  - 10–20%
  - 20–40%
  - 50–70%
- How much time do engineering students spend studying communication skills?
  - 5%
  - 15%
  - 25%
  - 50%
- In Figure 1-1, how many of the tasks in the engineer's typical day directly involve writing?
  - 0
  - 3
  - 5
  - 7
- Using 2011 salary numbers in the example, how much is the engineer being paid to write?
  - \$24,000
  - \$18,000
  - \$12,000
  - \$6,000



5. What does accountability as used in this chapter mean?
  - a. The ability of engineers to do their work in such a way that it is safe from lawsuit.
  - b. The ability of engineers to explain their work to a broad audience.
  - c. The ability of engineers to explain their work to engineers in other specializations.
  - d. The ability of engineers to do their work in a cost-effective manner.
6. What is the problem involving specialization as discussed in this chapter?
  - a. Nonengineering audiences cannot understand the communications of engineers in specializations.
  - b. Engineers in different specializations can easily understand each other's technical communications.
  - c. Engineers in different specializations cannot understand each other's technical communications.
  - d. Engineers in different specializations have a greater problem with accountability.
7. Which of the following is not an example of noise in a communication?
  - a. Using commas in large numbers for a document intended for a culture that uses periods instead.
    - b. Using Mb (megabits) when MB (megabytes) is meant.
    - c. Leaving out the word "not."
    - d. Using headings to indicate the topic of the sections they introduce.
8. Which of the following are you if you send a Twitter message to a colleague?
  - a. Encoder
  - b. Decoder
  - c. Channel
  - d. Signal
  - e. Noise
9. Which of the following are you if you read a Twitter message sent by a colleague?
  - a. Encoder
  - b. Decoder
  - c. Channel
  - d. Signal
10. According to one senior engineer, how much does it cost to produce a single page of an internal report?
  - a. \$200
  - b. \$100
  - c. \$50
  - d. \$5

## Answers

1. c, 2. a, 3. d, 4. a, 5. a, 6. c, 7. d, 8. a, 9. b, 10. a

## ENGINEERING COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

### Handheld Muon Detector

Like this one, each chapter will conclude with a challenge to your engineering imagination, entrepreneurship, creativity, and ingenuity—or some combination.

On November 22, 2017, NewAtlas.com (formerly GizMag.com) published an article by Michael Irving entitled "Handheld muon detector catches ghostly cosmic ray particles."

Go to NewAtlas.com and search for "handheld muon detector," or perform a general search to find another article about the technology. Read one or more articles and consider how this device could be used in practical applications. Is it just pure science without any practicality whatsoever? Is there a "killer app" just waiting to be developed for it? This is your engineering challenge for this chapter!

When you finish your reading, explain your ideas on how to put this device—or modifications—to good practical use. Be sure to write to a novice, nonengineering audience.