

Technical Writing Tips

A few basic suggestions by Steve Wells

All the negative examples here come from a single source document.

Present Arms

Use present tense unless you *must* use another tense to express the idea.

Use

This warning is

The dates you enter

Will not use

This warning will be

The dates you will enter

Be Active

Use active voice unless there is no reasonable way to avoid passive voice (as when omitting the sentence subject to avoid laying blame for errors.) Active voice is simple, powerful, and direct. Passive voice is wordy, wimpy, and circumlocutory.

Use

Click the **Monitor** module to view alerts for your referred cases.

You can make corrections

appears

Isn't used by you

Alerts for your referred cases can be viewed by clicking the "Monitor" module.

Corrections can be made

is displayed

Brevity

The fewer words you use, the less you have to write.

Brief

Click the **Save** button to ensure entered grid data is not lost.

take action to resolve the inconsistency

You can

complete the necessary tasks

This is wordy with extra unnecessary words

The **Save** button must then be clicked to ensure entered data is not lost after it has been added to the grid.

provide the action you need to take in order to resolve the inconsistency

You will be able to

complete the tasks necessary to complete this task

Preposition Proposition

Don't add superfluous prepositions.

Use

Click the column header

We have taken this case off your inventory.
among your referred patients.

Helpful information to complete a task
more quickly

Not with

Clicking on the column header

We have taken this case off of your inventory.
from among your referred patients.

Helpful information for how to complete a task
more quickly

Go Going

Use a present tense verb to indicate action. Gerunds are longer and can produce confusing translations in other languages.

Use

Click the column header

Click this button

Click one of the data selections to

Not using

Clicking on the column header

By clicking this button

Clicking one of the data selections results in

Don't Quote Me

Use quotes for attribution or to qualify an unusual usage. Do *not* use quotes to replace formatting or to indicate labels.

Use

the **Monitor** module

Click **Save** to save the data

"Not"

the "Monitor" module

to "Save" the data

Complete Expressions

Follow modifiers with their antecedents.

Use complete terms

in the dropdown list [or box]

Missing the final

in the dropdown

You Can't Please Them All

An occasional "please" imposes inconsistency. Omit it except for rare extreme emphasis. Write instructions in *imperative* mood. Terse instructions are *not* impolite.

"Just do it"

Nike

"So, pretty please, with sugar on top, clean the ..."

Pulp Fiction

Use

Enter appointment information
Select **Scheduled** status.

No thanks, if you please

Please put in appointment information
Please invoke the status of "Scheduled".

Okey-Dokey

Avoid jargon or colloquial terms. Use verbs that clearly specify the action.

Use

a fully operating environment
enter appointment information
do not occur in this environment
to replace one selection with another
This message indicates that you must correct this information.
Exercises 1, 2, and 3 provide detailed instructions

Nope, no way, José!

the environment that will exist at go-live
put in appointment information
will not happen in this environment
If you want to replace one check with another
This message will tell you that you need to correct this information.
Exercises 1, 2 and 3 give detailed instructions

Who's in Charge?

*And strange to tell, among that Earthen Lot
Some could articulate, while others not:
And suddenly one more impatient cried—
"Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"*

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam
Quatrain LX

User

You cannot submit information to the database until you correct these fields.
You can edit information
Within the print dialog box, users choose the output device

Used

These fields must be corrected before SIS will allow you to submit information to the database.
allows editing information
The print dialog box allows users to choose the output device