

## ***The Worst Words in Technical Writing***

It's possible to blur meaning through flaws in organization, terminology, and sentence structure. But, but, but, but, but... a big part of the problem is caused by just plain bad words – overworked, misused, excessive, and essentially meaningless. At their worst, they muddle the meaning. At their best, they are inconvenient and the reader must to avoid them to get the real words in the sentence – a little like trying to avoid snowflakes in winter.

<b>ability</b>	This is what software features always give the user. After all these years, the user should have more ability than Stephen Hawking and Jascha Heifitz combined. You can put this little sucker out of its misery any time.
<b>all</b>	The most overused and unneeded of the excessive qualifiers. Writers will say, "The system will now process all changes" when they mean "The system will now process the changes." Otherwise, it sounds like there are days when only some changes will be processed.
<b>allow</b>	I allow my kid to have a cookie but my computer doesn't allow me to do anything. A tool enables me to do a task. The computer enables me to do something.
<b>and/or</b>	The perfect word for the writer who can't make up his/her/its mind.
<b>At this point in time</b>	Now, right now, not earlier, not later not necessary.
<b>current</b>	This word works best when you're talking about electricity. It sometimes works when you are comparing with "previous." Otherwise, it doesn't work. Don't say, "The current screen displays..." when you mean "The active screen displays..."
<b>existing</b>	What? As opposed to nonexistent? It's not the "existing data on the existing screen." It's just the "data on the screen."
<b>facilitate</b>	This nugget of 90's talk should never appear in manuals. It's a puffed-up word and it's usually a lie.
<b>overall</b>	This one ranks right up there with "all." It does sound grand, though, don't it?
<b>permits allows lets</b>	These words are used when the software is about to grant the user some great privilege, probably undeserved. "Allows" and "lets" are the worst with "permits" not far behind. Eliminate them and you can probably get by with the other two until something better comes along.
<b>provide</b>	This is the hardest working word in technical writing. Every procedure is introduced, it seems, with "This option provides you..." It's time to retire it, except in those very rare cases where it's really the needed word. Do not resort to its cousin "gives," especially when used with the granting of the "ability" to do something.
<b>represents</b>	Nay, madam. 'Tis.
<b>specific</b>	The opposite of "all," and equally bad. It's amazing how rarely this word is needed. Shall we ask the user to enter a "specific" loan amount desired to prevent him or her from entering "a whole lot of money?" How about a "specific" temperature, so the user doesn't try "pretty hot today?" Here's a nice unsolicited e-mail from a dude selling books about technical writing: INDEXING: A NUTS-AND-BOLTS GUIDE FOR TECHNICAL WRITERS is also available as part of the four book Tech Writers Library. Purchase these four books by August 17, 2001 and you will receive a \$75.00 discount. If you have specific questions about this title, please contact... Naw, I just have general questions, like what's the average depth of Lake Huron.

<b>specified</b>	Once in a great while, you can use this word. For example, you might say, "The system will accept the change you specify. Otherwise it will use the default." Please avoid starting every line of a procedure with it (as in "Specify the name, specify the zip code," etc.). Especially avoid using it in long lists of screen fields: "Date... specifies the date, Time... specifies the time, Name... specifies the name."
<b>supports</b>	Here's a word that has lost all meaning. Some would say "the Intel platform supports Linux," while others would say "Linux supports the Intel platform." Actually, nuthin' supports nuthin'. Linux runs on the Intel platform.
<b>that</b>	The thing that I don't like about "that" is that that word "that" could be eliminated 80% of the time, and that would result in no loss of meaning.
<b>usage</b>	Just as bad as "utilize."
<b>utilize</b>	Really? What ever happened to "use?"