

GRAMMAR TIPS FOR CODE MONKEYS



Active Voice

It is common practice to use *passive voice* in technical writing — you were probably told to do this in science lessons at school. When you use passive voice, you tell the reader that something has happened, but not who has done it.

You will find that using *active voice* instead will make your message clearer. By explicitly stating who is doing what, you are giving your reader important information that they would otherwise have to guess. Using active voice has the useful side-effect of helping you to avoid *anthropomorphism* (attributing human characteristics to other things), in such phrases as 'the button needs to be pressed'.

- ✗ *The test tube was filled...*
- ✓ *I filled the test tube...*
- ✗ *The printer must be connected before the page can be printed.*
- ✓ *You must connect the printer before you can print the page.*

- ✗ *It will be difficult if you use too few commas for your reader to mentally parse your sentences.*
- ✓ *It will be difficult, if you use too few commas, for your reader to mentally parse your sentences.*
- ✗ *Semicolons indicate a long pause, [and] they are very useful.*
- ✓ *Semicolons indicate a long pause; they are very useful.*
- ✗ *This first part is not a: sentence, banana, or kangaroo.*
- ✓ *There are two situations when you should use a colon: to introduce an explanation of your point, and to start a list.*
- ✓ *You can use a colon between sentences: The second sentence should start with a capital letter.*

3 Less is more

Fewer words. Shorter words.

When you have written something, read back through it and see if there is anything that could be trimmed without altering the meaning. Similarly, think about whether any long words are really necessary, or you are just using them to impress: your message will actually be more impressive and persuasive without the 'fluff'. This is particularly important when trying to communicate technical ideas to a non-technical audience.

- ✗ *You can, if you like, utilize third-party plug-ins to extend and enhance the software's feature set.*
- ✓ *You can add features to the software with plug-ins.*
- ✗ *The object orientation paradigm necessitates the modularisation of the problem framework into a hierarchy of classes.*
- ✓ *With OO you must break up the problem into classes.*

- ✗ *Grate 250g carrot's.*
- ✓ *Matthew's new server has four CPUs.*
- ✓ *It's important that you monitor its progress.*

5 Gratuitous capitalisation

Capital letters have only three uses: to start sentences, for proper nouns (names of people, places, etc.) and, optionally, in headings. Specifically, you should not use capital letters just to make a word stand out; consider using italics instead.

- ✗ *Insert the Floppy Disk into the Drive.*
- ✓ *Insert the floppy disk into the drive.*
- ✗ *It was the most efficient Sort Algorithm he had ever seen.*
- ✓ *It was the most efficient sort algorithm he had ever seen.*

2 Commas, semicolons, colons

Most people don't use enough commas, and perhaps don't use colons or semicolons at all. It is a good idea to use a *serial comma* before the 'and' or 'or' that introduces the last item in a list; either way, be consistent.

You should use a *comma* wherever someone reading the sentence would naturally pause.

You should use a *semicolon* to indicate a longer pause, indicating to the reader that the rest of the sentence is changing direction slightly.

Finally, you should use a *colon* when your sentence has two parts, the second of which expands upon the first. If you follow a colon with a full sentence then use a capital letter. Use a colon after a clause only if that clause is a sentence in its own right.

4 Apostrophes

There are two uses for apostrophes: missing characters and possession. Never use apostrophes for plurals (the so-called *grocer's apostrophe*). Take care with the special case *it's* (it is) and *its* (belonging to it).