

How Simple Is

SIMPLIFIED TECHNICAL ENGLISH?

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Of all the attempts to control or modify the often bewildering English language, the most popular is Simplified Technical English, or STE. STE is a controlled form of the language that uses a carefully limited and uniform subset of English. Advocates of STE say that it has the following effects:

- Shortens reading time
- Eliminates vagueness
- Makes translation quicker and cheaper
- Makes reading easier for non-native English speakers
- Streamlines automated translation

Both native and non-native speakers can have difficulty reading English because of often puzzling syntax rules, the number of words that can be used both as verbs and nouns, and the unique problem of all those synonyms and homonyms. These are the problems STE was created to solve, but does it really work? In answering this question, I'll describe some of the features, benefits, and disadvantages of STE, share my personal experience with STE, and discuss strategies for implementation.

The Basics

STE comes from a long line of controlled and modified versions of English, including Basic English, a stripped-down version created by linguists as both a communication enhancement and a strategy for teaching English, and Special English, a Cold War-era linguistic relic still used for Voice of America radio broadcasts. STE was developed specifically for aerospace industry documentation in the 1970s under the moniker *Simplified English* and is now used by technical writers in several industries. Even technical writers who don't use STE already follow many of its basic principles, such as the following:

- Always use the same word to describe the same thing.
- Use the active voice wherever possible.
- Don't use long noun strings.
- Use shorter words in place of longer ones.

One of the unique features of STE is that it encourages the use of hyphens

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to prevent perplexing noun strings or clusters, even when doing so results in awkward constructions such as *second-valve-outboard-window-lever*. If you're writing STE, you accept such awkwardness as the price you pay to avoid confusing readers about the relationships among words in a noun string.

Another feature of STE is that each word has only one meaning. Consider the following STE-approved sentence: "Put the set in the empty place." STE doesn't allow "Place the set in the empty place" because *place* can be used only as a noun.

Similarly, "Empty the set" is not an approved usage since *empty* can be only an adjective in STE. The word *close* can be used as a verb but not as an adjective. You can't tell your users to "Loop the wire around the central unit" because *loop* can be used only as a noun.

Restrictions on verb usage in STE are minimal. The most important rule is to avoid the present progressive and gerund forms—in other words, don't "ing" your verbs. Words that end in "ing" are confusing to non-native speakers because they can fill many different grammatical roles in English. Gerunds, for instance, can function as nouns and occupy the same position as nouns in a sentence (subject, direct object, subject complement, or object of a preposition).

One final distinguishing feature of STE is that it limits sentence length to twenty words, although an average of one sentence in ten can be up to twenty-five words long.

Technical communicators in a wide variety of industries modify the existing STE standards to fit their needs, and you can do the same. You don't have to be an STE literalist. In fact, STE is likely

more used in modified forms than in its official form.

Benefits

Whether or not your writing gets translated, STE has clear advantages over standard English when you're writing for a global audience. Both translators and non-native readers are adversely affected by poor readability; translation can be especially challenging when the translator is not familiar with the technical aspects of the product. STE helps translators by minimizing inconsistent and overly specialized language. Adhering to STE's rules can often lead to simpler and clearer documents, making translation easier, more correct, and more economical. And because STE uses fewer words, it helps shrink the size of your documents, which cuts translation, printing, and other production costs.

Challenges and Questions

Despite the benefits of STE, questions about its effectiveness remain. While STE does rein in some of the wild ways of English, there is no guarantee that non-native speakers will find STE easier to read than standard English. Given that an excellent command of English is not exactly rare, is STE correct in assuming that most non-native speakers haven't already mastered the challenges of English? And do non-native readers really find it that challenging to distinguish between verb and adjective forms? Although English does have grammatical peculiarities, its grammar and structure are far less complex than those of most European languages.

Another complaint about STE is that it sometimes makes writing sound dry and lifeless—characteristics that many technical writers struggle against. In its zeal to simplify, STE can take the humanity out of written communication.

Given these criticisms, managers should consider the following challenges before directing their technical writing staff to use STE:

- Writers and editors must be trained in STE.
- In-house dictionaries and style guides must be developed and reviewed. If your company has strict rules about ad-

hering to an in-house style guide that conflicts with STE's standards, then STE probably isn't a good choice.

- For some writers, conforming to a new set of writing rules can interrupt the normal and automatic flow of the writing process.
- Rewriting to conform to new standards is time-consuming.
- STE's principles may not be appropriate for all applications. Some applications and/or procedures may be too specialized for STE.

Personal Experiences

I discovered STE while working on a major rewrite and edit of a project I was forced to rush through. Curious to see what all the fuss was about, I decided to apply STE to my editing/rewrite process. The results were mixed. Sometimes my natural writing flow was interrupted because I kept checking on my compliance with STE rules. I found that keeping the rules in mind while writing and then performing an STE edit was easier than writing STE from the start.

One of the purported benefits of STE is that it results in more accurate translations when using automated translation tools, but I didn't see that benefit. The online translation tool I used translated non-STE-approved sentences as effectively as approved ones.

However, STE was a great safety net. It reminded me to use consistent terminology and that English can be confusing for the non-native speakers in my audience.

Strategies for Implementation

Writers and editors need to be trained in STE's rules. You can either wing it by using the myriad online resources for STE, or you can check to see if any STE training programs are available in your area.

Learning STE is much easier than learning a foreign language, but you might have to create a cheat sheet to remember some new writing rules and styles. You might also find that the STE-approved word list doesn't always fit your needs. Luckily, STE encourages writers to build their own unique word lists. For information on how to obtain the official list of STE rules and approved words, visit the

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Web site of the Aerospace and Defence Simplified Technical English Maintenance Group (ASD STEMG) at www.simplifiedenglish-aecma.org/Simplified_English.htm#se_guide. A free, unofficial list of rules and an approved

RESOURCES FOR LEARNING AND USING STE

If you want to learn more about STE, the Aerospace and Defence Simplified Technical English Maintenance Group (ASD STEMG) is probably the best place to start. You can find a huge amount of information about the official specification, training, software, and other useful information on the ASD STEMG site (www.simplifiedenglish-aecma.org). Although intended mainly for the aerospace industry, the site has a lot of information helpful for all industries. Information on how to obtain the official STE rules and approved word list is located at www.simplifiedenglish-aecma.org/Simplified_English.htm#se_guide.

Boeing has a great site that explains STE and the STE checker: www.boeing.com/phantom/sechecker/se.html.

Download a compilation of the basic rules and approved word lists, and view links to other STE resources, at Userlab Incorporated's Simplified English page, www.userlab.com/SE.html.

Smart Communications also has a lot of information and resources for implementing STE: www.smartny.com/simplifiedenglish.htm. 


word list are available at www.userlab.com/Downloads/SE.pdf.

To ensure consistent use of the right words, you need to create your own company- or department-specific dictionary of custom terms. This dictionary should be carefully produced and then double-checked for completeness and accuracy.

You might also consider purchasing an STE checker tool, which checks text for compliance against the rules of STE and can be integrated with your in-house list of approved words. Some industry-specific and configurable checker tools are available at the Web sites listed in the sidebar.

A Helpful Model

Simplified Technical English clearly offers benefits to technical writers interested in improving the readability of their work. Although strict adherence to all official STE rules is practically impossible, and not even helpful in some organizations, STE serves as an interesting and practical model.

Since experienced technical writers already apply the basic rules of STE when writing procedures, STE may be more useful when writing explanatory sections or highly technical documents like applications specifications or software requirements documents. STE might also work best for new writers or technical professionals who aren't usual writers. But even experienced writers can benefit from using STE as a model for ensuring consistency and clarity in their writing. 

SUGGESTED READING

Thomas, Margaret, Gloria Jaffe, J. Peter Kincaid, and Yvette Stees. "Learning to Use Simplified English: A Preliminary Study." *Technical Communication*, February 1992. (This article is available for purchase and download from Amazon.com.)

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