

# MAVERICK MESSENGER

Topics in Technical Communication

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## Content Design & Delivery

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# Notes from a Novice Indexer

**SAMANTHA ROBERTS**

*Enter the world of indexing.*

**W**elcome novice indexers from one who has crawled out of the other side of that first indexing project a wiser, wearier soul. Even after researching books on how to index, mapping out an index plan with care, and approaching it with all the gusto of a Pomeranian attacking a German Shepard, regrettably there are still rough waters lurking ahead. In order to save others from at least a little seasickness, this novice humbly presents these notes, alternatively titled, "Things Not to Do, Which This Novice Knows Because They Did Them, and Then Regretted It Bitterly."

## **The Index Should Not Be Longer Than the Paper**

Once the basic elements of indexing are achieved, there is a heady rush of knowledge and the desire to index everything in sight. Resist this impulse. Down this primrose path lies only ten page articles with twenty page indexes. Hard though it may be to believe through the desire to efficiently label and categorize the entire world, not everything needs an index. This is a lot to accept; it is fine to take a minute.

Having come to terms with a harsh reality, it is time to pick a worthwhile project where an index will benefit the reader. The first time around try to keep it manageable, if possible. Take it from this weary novice, avoid primroses, but do not try to ascend Everest with a pair of hiking boots and a can-do attitude, either. The ideal first project is long enough or detailed enough to require an index to assist the reader, has a clear topic with well-defined headings, and has been appropriately edited to make the capture of relevant subjects not too arduous (de Keyser, 2012). Projects like this do not always exist, but every indexer can have a dream.

## **How Not to Index Every Other Word**

Project in hand, actual indexing may commence. This is an exciting moment where the indexer is not yet tired of reading the same document for the twenty-fifth time. Appreciate this moment. After sufficient appreciation, do not put hand to keyboard and sail in. Now is the time to consider how to approach the index. There are several ways that an index can be built, some of which were hopefully uncovered in the research phase. If this was not the case, do not worry. There is always time for research, as anyone who has ever procrastinated on a term paper can attest.

The person, company, or organization that is requesting the indexing may have templates, standards, or opinions about the final form and contents of the index (Ament, 2001). The customer, while not always right, is the one that will have to live with the result so it is a good idea to determine what they are looking for in an index. Though do feel free to politely float a few alternative suggestions if they decide it would be a good idea to, perhaps, index the word "the."



Once the basic elements of indexing are achieved, there is a heady rush of knowledge and the desire to index everything in sight.

Some approaches to indexing start by indexing the main heading of all the chapters first, then working through subheadings, and so on. Others begin on page one and continue straight through the entire document on a first pass. Specialized indexes for topics such as genealogy, geography, or images have unique methods to identify key terms and group subjects. This novice has never tried to index a picture and can only imagine an entry capturing all of the pictures with blue in them. That is probably not the ideal approach, if there's anyone looking for advice on the matter. In any case, all of these methods probably work better than starting off by indexing 'the,' so at least there is an easy bar to clear. Make time for a little research and pick the method that will work best for the project, it'll save a lot of heartbreak and abuse of the delete key down the road.

### **Don't Reinvent the Wheel (Especially If This New Wheel Turns Out Square and On Fire)**

Now is the moment that every novice eagerly anticipates, where the grind of research and planning is thrown over to put that blinking cursor out of its misery and begin to create an actual index. A word of caution is advisable at this point. While there is satisfaction in pinning down each word and phrase to be indexed, then carefully building the index word-by-word, maintaining the appropriate formatting and rearranging for alphabetization, this begins to pall on approximately the third page of an index. What is also satisfying and less apt to drive this novice indexer to a bonfire sacrifice of the document in question is that marvel of the modern age: automated indexing.

Many word processing programs, databases, and applications have the capability to automate some or all of the indexing process, not to mention indexing programs specifically written for this task (Apel, 2012). It is worth checking in how-to documentation, organizational standard operating procedures, or an informal poll of everyone within yelling distance, if any of these apply to a project. In one common word processor, the index is created in a two-step process. The indexer highlights a relevant word in the text, clicks the "Index This Thing Here" button, and defines how the word should be indexed. This is repeated throughout the document for all words or phrases to be indexed. At this point that button and the indexer are worn out, so the indexer then clicks the "Build this Index Now" button to generate a nice tidy index at the indicated place in the document (Tyson, 2010). Note the lack of a bonfire in this process.

### **A Few Words in Farewell**

Such is all of the hard-earned wisdom at hand and so these notes must close, at least until a second project looms upon the horizon and this novice makes entirely new mistakes. Until then, may the future be littered with well-structured documents, concise terms, and usable indexes for all. ■

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Make time for a little research and pick the method that is best for you, it'll save a lot of heartbreak and abuse of the delete key down the road.



# What is Podcasting?

CRAIG MCCORMACK

*Explore why podcasting is important and how to create your own.*

**Y**ou may be a podcast listener, but if you have important stories you'd like to tell or have a passion for sharing your expertise on a subject with an audience, you might consider podcasting yourself. To do that, you'll need some inexpensive equipment, including the right audio editing software. Fortunately, if you have a laptop or home computer, you can get the editing piece of your podcasting kit for free with Audacity.

## What is Podcasting?

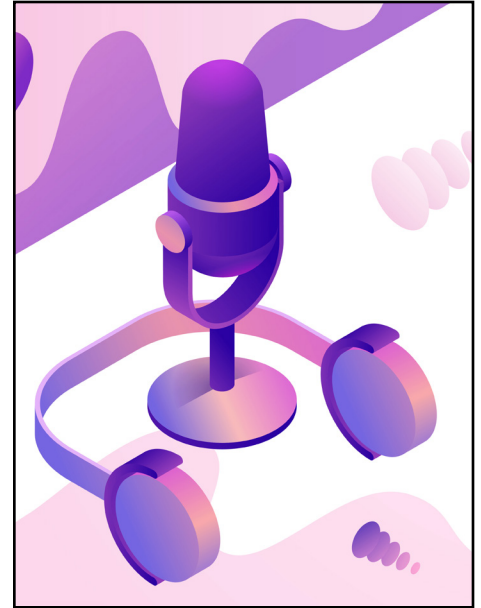
Podcasting is a popular, inexpensive way to build an audience for your comedy, teaching, corporate training, music, or talk radio style program. It can help promote a cause, business, or viewpoint, and for many, it is a source of income as well. In more technical terms, it is the syndication of primarily audio files, typically in an MP3 or M4A format. The audio files can be downloaded or consumed via streaming, and updates are usually delivered in sequential episodes via an RSS feed. Many people subscribe to their favorite podcast "channels" through popular syndication platforms such as Stitcher or Apple Podcasts and listen to them through their mobile devices.

The audience for podcasting is large and growing. According to Greenwald (2018), "roughly 25% of the U.S. population over age 12 in 2017" listened to a podcast. That's an estimated 67 million people, "up 45% from 2015." According to Leadem (2017), among the population of Americans that listen to podcasts, "52% of people listen to podcasts while driving, 46% while traveling, and 40% while walking, running, or riding a bike." Because of the ability to consume podcasting anytime, anywhere, many now consider podcasting to be something like "on-demand" radio.

As the audience grows, so do the revenue opportunities. There are several common ways people make money from their podcasts, most often through advertising such as paid promotions during the podcast, "membership platforms" like Patreon, selling tickets to live podcasts, subscriptions, sponsorships of the podcast, and selling their own products, services, or merchandise directly on their show.

## What Should I Podcast About?

According to Edison Research (2019), the self-described "leading podcast research company in the world," gave the top five reasons people listen to podcasts (in order of importance): to learn new things, to be entertained, to stay on top of certain topics/news, to relax, and to feel inspired. If you have something to say or music that you'd like to share that fits into these groups, it might be a good idea to start listening to podcasts that fall into similar categories. Pay special attention to how they produce their shows, their format, and the quality (or lack thereof) of their work.



Because of the ability to consume podcasting anytime, anywhere, many now consider podcasting to be something like "on-demand" radio.

## Using the Right Audio Editing Tools

While you can use almost any digital recording device to record a digital file, the editing software will help you format, cut, modify, and clean up the file to make it more professional and allow it to play on most mobile phones and other digital hardware.

Audacity is a popular, open-source audio editing application for Windows or Mac OS. There are also many extensions available for free or commercially to expand the large library of features it already comes with. For this work I used version 2.3.1 of Audacity® recording and editing software. It can be downloaded from [the link listed in the references below](#).

Once downloaded, you'll need to download an additional software library to extend the range of audio formats you can import and export to. From the Downloads drop-down box, click on Plug-Ins. Scroll down to the bottom of the page. Under Libraries, click on FFMpegFAQ and choose the download option based on your operating system for the additional free software you'll need to export MP3s and M4As. M4A is the default audio format for Apple iTunes.

After this is completed, you're ready to start.

## Your First Recording

Assuming you have your microphone plugged into your computer, it's simple to make your first recording with Audacity. Open the program and then follow these simple steps to make your first recording.

1. Go to the microphone icon and select the microphone you'd like to use from the drop-down menu (Figure 1). Next, go to the right of the drop-down menu where you'll find the speaker icon and select the speakers or headset that you want the output to go to.

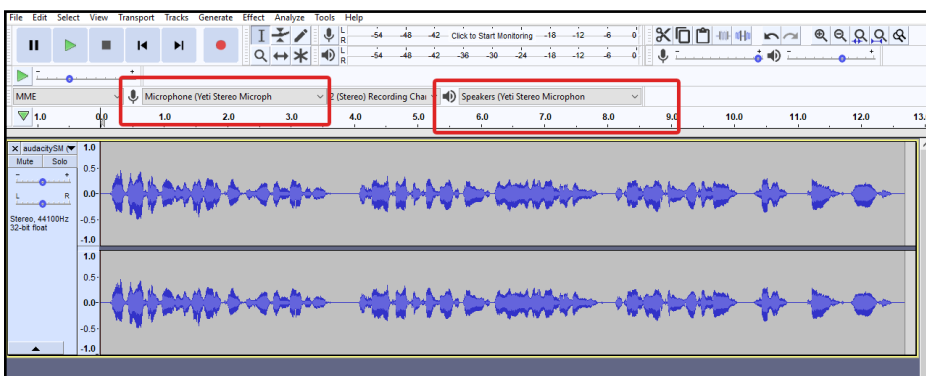
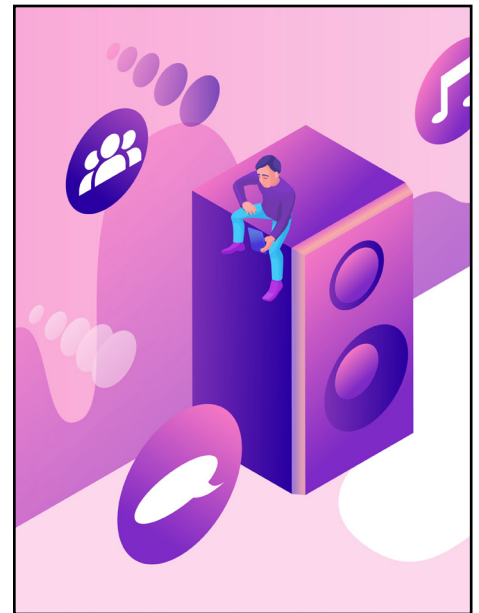


Figure 1. Audacity. (2019). Audacity input/output selection. Image, screen capture © 2019 Audacity. Screenshot by author.

2. In between the microphone and speaker drop-down menus, you'll find the recording channels drop-down where you'll want to make sure "2 (Stereo) Recording Channels" is selected.
3. Go to the upper right section of the screen and set your microphone volume. Too low, you can be hard to hear. (Figure 2.) Too high, and you can get a type of distortion called "clipping." You'll have to make a few recordings to see what volume setting is best.



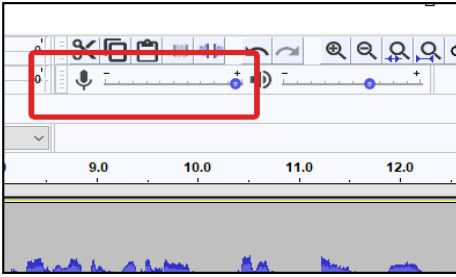


Figure 2. Audacity. (2019). Audacity volume selection. Image, screen capture © 2019 Audacity. Screenshot by author.

4. Make sure your mouth is about a fist's distance away from the microphone, then click the red record button (Figure 3).

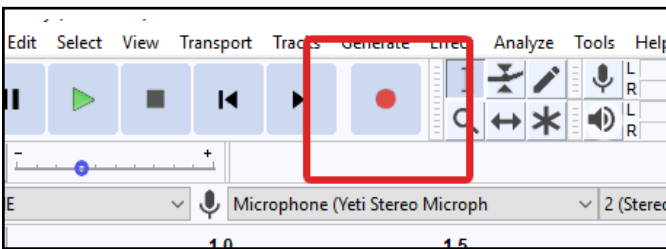


Figure 3. Audacity. (2019). Audacity initiate record action. Image, screen capture © 2019 Audacity. Screenshot by author.

5. To stop the recording, click on the square to the left of the record button. Use the playback buttons to listen to what you just recorded.
6. To save your file to an MP3, click the File menu, go to "Export," and select "Export as an MP3." To save as an M4A, go to "Export," and select "Export Multiple." Use the "Format" drop-down menu to select the format you'd like, then click the "Export" button. Your new audio file will then be saved in an MP3 or M4A format. Before saving, you might want to play around with the effects menu and see what it does to your voice.

## Final Suggestions

While the instructions for Audacity on the website and in the Help menu are vast and thorough, you'll want to check out the multitude of free Audacity tutorials available on YouTube. There you can find instructions to use the effects to do things like make your voice sound "warm," edit your audio files, and add additional professional touches to your audio file. Audacity will help you turn your ideas, imagination, and passion into the next popular podcast. ■

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The editing software will help you format, cut, modify, and clean up the file to make it more professional.



# Podcasting and Branding, What is the Connection?

MITZI COLLINSWORTH

*Create a larger following for your product or service with podcasting.*

**A**re you tired of sitting in traffic searching for music to distract you from the stress of commuting? There are approximately 115 million cars on the road each day sitting in traffic (Puentes, 2017). According to the American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, over 76 percent of people drive alone in their car instead of using alternative transportation. The average worker spends 26 minutes per commute, totaling 52 minutes per day (Puentes, 2017). Those of us who partake in this daily ritual know how stressful this situation can be. Most of us will surf music on our phones to distract ourselves. However, there is a new medium taking the airwaves by storm called podcasting.

## What is podcasting?

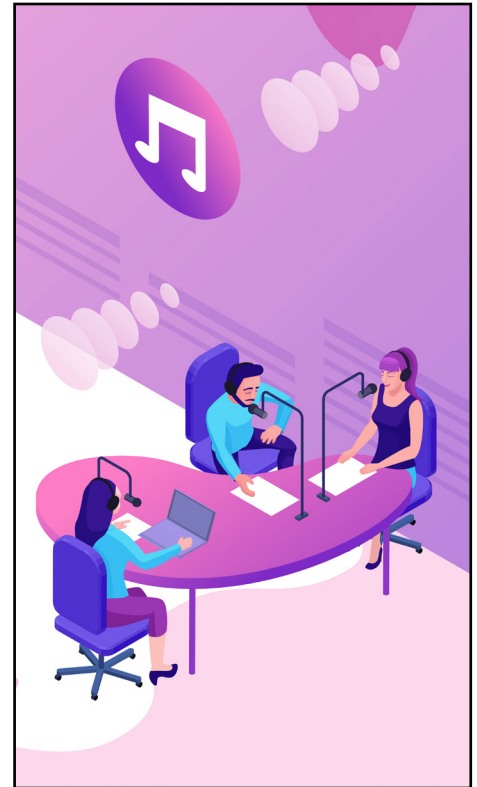
According to Wikipedia, "Podcasting, previously known as 'audio blogging,' has its roots dating back to the 1980s. With the advent of broadband internet and portable digital audio playback devices such as the iPod, podcasting began to catch hold in late 2004" (Podcast, n.d.). In recent years, podcasting has seen growth of 30 percent year-on-year (Process Street, n.d. - a, "The facts," para. 1). It is safe to say that podcasting has become very popular. There is something for everyone, but there is still ample room to grow.

A podcast creates interest in a website. Think of this medium as marketing for a particular niche connected to a website that will lead to a successful business or nonprofit. According to a podcast publishing checklist article, "A podcast is your chance to tell people what you're all about and connect with them on a personal level, building trust, giving information, maybe making them laugh. Having something to listen to on a regular basis creates loyalty, where the customer will keep coming back and listening intently to what you have to say" (Process Street, n.d. - b, "Reinforcing your brand," para. 2). This in turn helps build your overall brand.

*This American Life* is a weekly podcast supported by National Public Radio (NPR) and is rated the second most popular podcast (Podtrac, n.d.). Their podcast is like a mini movie, with a compelling person at the center of the story filled with concepts to provoke different emotions and thoughts. As followers donate, the podcast continues to create more journalistic works of art for their followers. The podcast typically has five to 10 stories in development for television or film (Salmon, 2018).

*The Daily* is the number one podcast show to date (Podtrac). After the success of *This American Life* leading the way for podcast shows, *The Daily* found success featuring expensive mini-documentaries allowing journalists to feature their work with the host Michael Barbaro. The success of the show has created its own income, gaining a front page spread in the *New York Times*. The podcast has its own radio show and has become the feature figure in the *New York Times*' brand (Salmon, 2018).

It seems that the success of a podcast can elevate the status of the supporting company or publisher drawing the public to its brand. The goal is to create a following supported by all other forms of marketing, including e-mail advertisements, social media banners, social media pages, blogs, newspapers, radio shows, and podcasts.





It seems that the success of a podcast can elevate the status of the supporting company or publisher drawing the public to its brand.

### How do podcasts fit into the world of technical communication?

This medium is the audio connection to the audience. It is a way to personalize and build a relationship with the listeners to gain loyalty to the overall brand. A podcast is one of many forms of technical communication to support all mediums as a whole. This personalized piece of medium has grown above and beyond what anyone could have imagined. The future is bright for audio production and podcast. So tomorrow when you are dying a little inside to survive your work commute, flip to your favorite podcast to make the drive a little easier. ■

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# Technical Communication for Product Instructions and Warnings

ALISSA SCHMIDT

*Protect yourself against product liability lawsuits.*

**T**echnical communicators write both product instructions and warnings and can benefit from understanding the nuances with this type of communication. First, instructions and warnings are not the same. Instructions cannot warn and a warning cannot be used in place of an instruction. “A warning calls attention to a particular procedure verbally, visually, or both” (Rude and Eaton 2011, p. 323). Instructions cover product use and anticipated misuse.

Allegedly defective product instructions or warnings can lead to lawsuits which, regardless of the outcome, cost the product manufacturer time and money. Technical communicators don’t need to be lawyers and don’t need to memorize product liability laws. They need to understand vulnerabilities, utilize guidelines common to their field, and use their intuition.

## Prior Research and Guidance

In “The Perils of Defective Documentation,” a checklist serves as a guide for writing to avoid products liability (Smith and Shirk, 1996). Even though it is more than twenty years old, the checklist remains a valid guide. The shortcomings with using checklists is in discussion of the underlying law.

## Shortcomings

Products liability is common law which means it comes from common decisions or rulings by courts rather than statutes. This can lead to changes over time that are not typically covered by technical communication scholars. This lack of research means prior guidance has not been updated. “Even if aspects of the law remain unchanged, new sources take prominence” (Todd, 2014, p. 403).

Another shortcoming of prior research is a disconnect between legal terminology and what is published by technical communicators. Negligence, for example, has five elements related to the law: duty, breach, actual cause, proximate cause, and damages. In reviewing prior research, Todd (2014) was unable to find a technical communication scholar who adequately described all elements; “if technical communication scholars are to instill legal literacy in students, the first step is learning the language actually used in the practice of law” (p. 405).

## Understanding Litigation

Lawsuits can take a significant amount of time and expense. When deciding whether to proceed with a case, an attorney will review the likelihood of success before assuming the risk of losing valuable time and money. During this review, an attorney must also determine whether the lawsuit has a good-faith basis in law and fact. If a lawsuit is filed without this good-faith basis, the attorney can face sanctions under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11 (Todd, 2014, p. 405-406).



Instructions cannot warn and a warning cannot be used in place of an instruction.

Under this federal rule, all elements of each cause of action must be proven. With negligence, for example, all five elements—duty, breach, actual cause, proximate cause, and damages—must be proven by a preponderance of the evidence. If the attorney “fails to establish all five, the negligence cause of action fails” (Todd, 2014, p. 406). Technical communicators who understand this can think like a litigator. They can learn which elements within the cause of action are most easily defeated and spend their time and effort making sure the product instructions and warnings are not weak in this area. This is likely to help the product manufacturer avoid litigation. Methods to ensure instructions and warnings are strong enough to avoid litigation should focus on three legal doctrines related to products liability—restatement, negligence, and breach.

### Restatement

A restatement provides courts with clarity regarding common law. *Third Restatement* is the most current published by the American Law Institute and adopted a functional approach to products liability (Todd, 2014, p. 410). This guides a litigator in a products liability case to investigate whether a product instruction or warning was required. In some situations, precedence set by courts establishes that it is not required in specific situations. If the risk and means to avoid the risk “are obvious to the reasonably foreseeable user, then warnings and instructions do nothing to reduce the danger; indeed, the risk serves as its own warning” (Todd, 2014, p. 208). In addition, technical communicators should not attempt to warn about every potential danger; “too many unnecessary warnings distract from—and may even reduce the believability and usability of—those that are necessary” (Todd, 2014, p. 208). The content of each instruction or warning must also be reviewed for adequacy. Technical communicators should utilize standard practices for writing—understand and address the audience, place information in an effective order, and select appropriate graphics.

### Negligence

A company can be found negligent if it is proven they did not exercise reasonable care in developing product instructions and warnings (Smith and Shirk, 1996, p. 191). Of the five negligence elements, breach is typically the most difficult to prove. Courts instruct juries to determine whether the defendant acted like another person would act under the same circumstances. Todd (2014) suggests technical communicators think of it this way: “would the reasonably prudent manufacturer have given a warning or instruction” (p. 412). If the manufacturer can show their approach is reasonable based on approaches from manufacturers of similar products, the breach element of negligence is typically defeated. A technical communicator should follow industry guidelines and document their process to best assist the defendant in demonstrating the approach was reasonable.

### Misrepresentation and Breach of Express Warranty

Harm caused by misrepresentation or a breach of express warranty, whether intentional or not, can result in damages owed to the plaintiff by the defendant. Both misrepresentation and breach of express warranty include a false statement. Technical communicators can limit the likelihood of litigation by raising a question if a statement of fact doesn’t seem truthful. In addition, product documentation should disclaim warranties, implied or express.

Technical communicators can limit the likelihood of litigation by raising a question if a statement of fact doesn’t seem truthful.



## Considerations and Conclusion

Todd (2014) offers four considerations for technical communicators:

1. Avoid instructions or warnings for obvious risks or unreasonable causes.
2. Follow guidance for writing product documentation and record that you are following it.
3. Comply with statutes, guidelines, and industry standards.
4. Verify that the documentation is true and avoids misrepresentations or false promises (p. 416).

Technical communicators writing product instructions or warnings should have a working knowledge of the product's liability. With this working knowledge, a technical communicator can write with a mindset of avoiding litigation. ■

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# The Minimalistic Solution to Clarity

ROBERT THOMAS

*Write with clarity to increase the quality of a reader's experience.*

It's easy to overlook the reader's experience when we write, but it is a form of user experience (reader experience). We want to convey ideas in their entirety, but a lack of clarity is problematic. Imagine the words on a page as steam in a glass box, and the ideas you are conveying as greased writing on the inside of it. Not enough steam, or too much steam, and the ideas are unclear. If you get the balance right, then the ideas are clearly visible from outside the box. A writer's job, especially regarding reader experience, is to figure out how much steam to put in the box based on the needs of the information conveyed and the targeted readers.

Consider a hypothetical example of a busy working professional looking to improve their writing. Offered the choice between a twenty-page paper and a short article like this one that offered the exact same ideas, which would they choose? Probably the shorter one, that respects their time—it offers a better reader (user) experience. Breadth of work does not directly equate to clarity. Someone handed a three-hundred-page manual to perform a task might say it feels impossible. Glen Paul (2005) wrote about the problem of too much information, whereby the reader is unable to process it all (p. 44). If you think about human memory like you would computer memory, we all have a finite amount of memory immediately available to take in new ideas. With a computer, if you exceed the available memory it usually stops working. With people and ideas, it can be the same when they are overloaded. So, we've identified two main points that we can cover here:

1. Too much density (of information, writing, or otherwise) obscures meaning and fogs up the ideas that you're conveying.
2. Reader experience can be improved by respecting readers' time by presenting ideas in as small of a package as possible, while being mindful to still include enough to convey our ideas.

So, how can writers handle those points? With minimal effort, specifically minimalistic writing efforts.

## Minimalistic Writing

To reduce the footprint on-page (with less dense writing), and improve readers' experiences, let's look at how minimalistic writing principles can work to declutter our writing and provide clarity through balanced concision. To start with, we can look to the early bodies of minimalistic work from John Carroll's minimalistic writing framework (for instructional design) for inspiration where to focus our writing as we declutter the page. Carroll outlines that we can most effectively relay information minimalistically by identifying what knowledge and experience our readers have, and then build what we do write to invoke that (Carroll 1990, 1998, 2015).

As one example, if readers know about the basics of how a car engine works, they wouldn't need that information when comparing two different engines. Instead, they'd want to know what differentiates them. Working to that extent, you are reducing the overall amount of information on the page while also conveying the



Breadth of work does not directly equate to clarity. Someone handed a three-hundred-page manual to perform a task might say it feels impossible.

information that they do need (what differentiates each engine) clearly for them. Another way to look at your application of minimalistic writing is to look at what you can cut, reword, or omit to leave only what conveys the information to your reader.

## Application

Now that the baseline of minimalistic writing has been outlined, and we have our goal (reduce density/redundancy of information specifically by removing and writing around what our readers know), we can look at a practical application of some basic minimalistic writing. Consider this sample [64 words]:

“V8 engines offer increased power at the expense of gas mileage. The Gord V8 gets 22mpg and has a 0-60 speed of 5.9 seconds. The Brevy V8 gets 23mpg but has a top speed of 0-60 of 6.1 seconds. Clearly, the advantage lies with Gord for drag racing, and Brevy for a more balanced engine for the weekend racer who also has a commute.”

When we know that the reader is looking into a comparative analysis between two competing V8 engines, it can be figured that they know a baseline of information about engines. Instead of listing both separately for comparison, we can change it to outline what differentiates them instead [45 words]:

“The Gord and Brevy V8’s are close in performance, what sets them apart is the Gord’s 0.2 second speed advantage (0-60 in 5.9 seconds), and the Brevy’s 1 extra mpg (23mpg). The Gord is best for performance, the Brevy if you want slightly more mpg.”

In this small example we’ve cut 19/64 words and changed the focus from a complete comparison (where the numbers are harder to follow, and for our reading audience not necessary) to outlining the differences—what our readers want to know. This example may not seem significant, but scaled up it can have cascading effects across larger bodies of writing: making the writing easier to follow by focusing on (almost only) the information readers are looking for (in the example above, what differentiates two similar engines). Now readers going back can more easily find the differences outlined, and those reading it for the first time will be able get the information that they are reading for more easily.

## Conclusion

With an eye towards bettering reader experience, working around what they know, applying minimalistic writing principles results in an easier to navigate page (since there is less on the page, and more is relevant). This increases the likelihood that the reader will find key information you have relayed, whether on the first read or upon later review. Applied across a larger body of work, the results will speak for themselves. ■

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Applying minimalistic writing principles results in an easier to navigate page.

# Contributors

*This issue of Maverick Messenger was made possible by the students of ENG577.  
The project was completed under the guidance of Professor Lee Tesdell.*

**Sara Cady** has a BA in Journalism and Mass Communications from the University of Minnesota. She is in her second year of the Technical Communication program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and hopes to graduate in the spring of 2020. She currently works as an editor.

**Mitzi Collinsworth** is a graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

**Shawneda Crout** is in her final semester of the Technical Communication MA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Shawneda works as a content writer for a web hosting firm. She is working to complete her graduate project and will complete her studies in July 2019.

**Craig McCormack** is a graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

**Kiera Pandolph** is a graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

**Eric Pugh** has a BA in English – Scientific and Technical Writing from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He is in his second semester in the Technical Communication MA program at the Minnesota State University, Mankato. He currently works as a senior knowledge analyst, specializing in developing procedures, job aids, and other documentation to support operations at a large insurance and financial services company.

**Samantha Roberts** has a BA in English from the University of Oklahoma and a BS in Computer Science from Park University. She is in her second semester in the Technical Communication MA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Samantha currently works as a technical writer and editor in Illinois, where they are willing to put up with both her novice indexing skills and sense of humor.

**Alissa Schmidt** is completing her final semester to earn her MA in Technical Communication from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She also holds a BS in Interior Design and is currently utilizing her design and technical experience as a technical resources manager at Viracon, a manufacturing company in Owatonna, Minnesota.

**Rachel Stern** has a BA in English Literature and International Studies from Iowa State University, and is completing her second semester in the Technical Communications MA program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Rachel currently works as a technical writer in the financial services industry. In her spare time she enjoys writing poetry and volunteering with animals.

**Darisha Sims** earned her Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, with a major in General Management and a minor in Professional Writing at the University of New Mexico. She currently works as a substitute teacher. She is a second-year graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato working towards her Master's in Technical Communication. She plans to attend law school after graduating.

**Robert Thomas** is a graduate student at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

## Organizing Committee

Shawneda Crout  
Samantha Roberts  
Alissa Schmidt  
Rachel Stern

## Editorial Staff

Sara Cady  
Kiera Pandolph  
Eric Pugh  
Darisha Sims

## Design Staff

Shawneda Crout  
Rachel Stern

## Authors

Mitzi Collinsworth  
Craig McCormack  
Samantha Roberts  
Alissa Schmidt  
Robert Thomas

## Faculty Advisor

Lee Tesdell, PhD





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