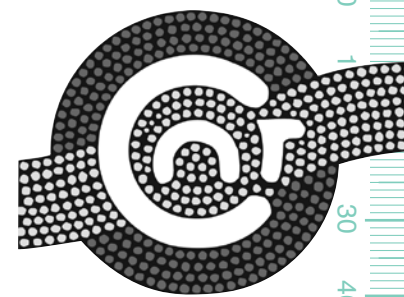


BUSH TECH #36

Making technical information easy to read and understand



Background

Technical information is not easy for most people to understand. Unless people have worked or trained in technical areas they may not understand specialist words. If you think carefully about the language and amount of information you use, you can present any information in a way most people can understand. Writing in plain English and using lots of images can help. This BUSH TECH gives some tips on writing in plain English and different ways of presenting information.

Where do you start?

It is important to be clear on what you want people to know about. Perhaps you want to write a report about a project that you have worked on. You might want to write about something that has been successful in another community. Once you know what you want to tell people, then you can work out who you want to tell.

Who do you want to tell?

You might want to tell all the men and women in a community about your project or idea. You might only want to tell people in one group, like the people who work at the Council. Once you work out who you want to tell, you need to think closely about these people. You should think about whether they will be able to read written English or whether you should use pictures, as well as words, to tell the story. You should think about the culture and customs of the people. Are there some things that you shouldn't write about?

What do they already know?

If you are telling people about a project that you worked on in their community they might already know some of the details. Work out what people already know about your project or idea and what else they might need to know before they can understand.

Think about whether the project or idea will make sense to the people you are writing for. This is important when you are trying to explain things that are complicated. For people to understand complicated information they need to be familiar with some of the underlying ideas. For example, if you are trying to explain global warming you would need to make sure the person first knows what 'greenhouse gases' are and how they are created. They would also need to know how they affect the Earth, and what this might mean for the future. This is certainly not simple or easy to explain.

If you are not sure about the existing level of understanding you should speak with someone in the community who should be able to tell you.

How do you work out your main messages?

It is important to work out the main things that you want people to understand. For example, if you want to explain different types of bore pumps, you could break it into a few key messages like:

1. How they work
2. How much they cost to buy and run
3. How much work they need to keep going
4. What skills you need to look after the pump
5. Where you can get parts and help

Working out a few clear messages means you can be sure that you have included all the important things.

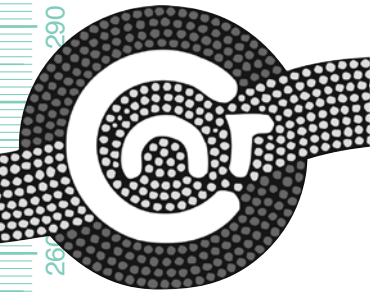
How to write

When you write a report you will need to think about the types of words you will use to explain your project. For example, 'check every two weeks' is better than 'undertake ongoing maintenance'. You should also keep your sentences simple. Try to keep one idea in each sentence. This will make the sentence clearer.

If your project is technical think about what you need to include and what you can leave out. You might not need to include all the details in your report. If you want to include those details you will need to think about how you can explain them in a way that makes sense. Again, think about the knowledge that you would need to have to understand the ideas in the report.

Posters or visual communication

Using pictures or drawings helps people to understand the key points or messages. Make sure the images are relevant. There is no point using pictures if they don't add anything. You may need to use words to go with them, or explain them. Make sure the words you use aren't too technical and always spell them out.



BUSH TECH #36

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Storyboards

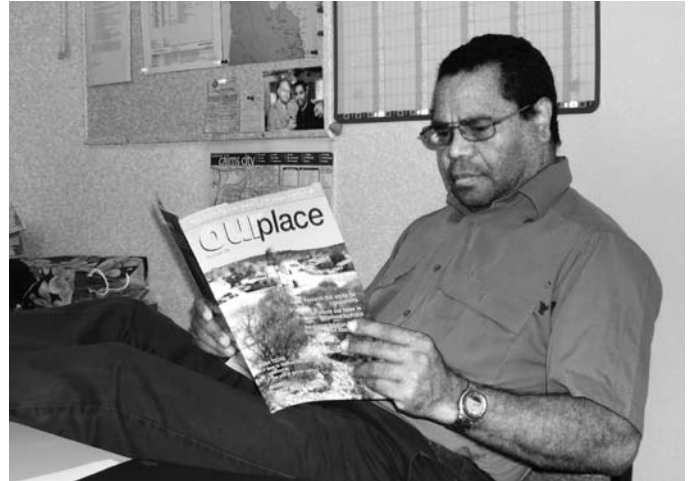
A storyboard is a board that has pictures and a few simple messages that tell a story in a sequence. This is like how cartoons tell a story. Storyboards are good to use to help you explain concepts and ideas. A storyboard gives people visual clues about the information you are presenting. It also helps people to remember your key messages.

Checking how easy your writing is to understand

If you want to work out how easy your writing is to read you can use the Flesch Reading Ease test. Your computer can help test the 'readability' of your writing. If you are typing on Microsoft Word you should go to the top of the screen and click on Tools, and then click on Options. A large box will come on the screen and you should find the section called Spelling & Grammar. This shows a list of things that you can click on. Down the bottom you should click on Show readability statistics. Once you have completed a spelling check the readability score for you document shows.

When you do this test you should try to have a high number at 70 or more. This means that people with early high school education should be able to read your document. Remember a good reading ease score doesn't mean that you have explained all the things that people need to know before they can understand your writing. It is always good to do a test run of your document to see what people understand and what you may need to explain better.

It is also a good idea to avoid writing large numbers and percentages. Think about visual ways that you can present the same information. For example, imagine that you wanted to explain that only seven of the twelve washing machines in a community worked. Instead of writing 58 per cent of washing machines in the community worked, you could display it like this. → → →



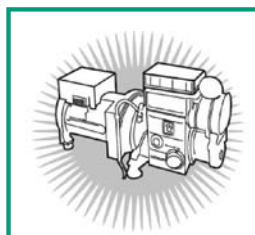
Washing machines in your community



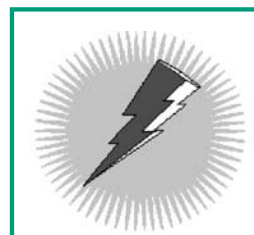
How does a diesel generator work?



Diesel is the fuel for the generator. Diesel is a fossil fuel and comes from the ground



The generator makes electricity



The electricity travels through the wires into the house



The electricity operates the appliances

An example of a story board taken from Bushlight's Energy Resources.