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An Application of Contemporary Technical Writing Standards
to Benjamin Franklin's Works

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
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ABSTRACT

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by

Edward Robert Milhorn

Although the field of technical writing is a growing occupation in the twenty-first century, technical writers have been around for years. The term technical writer can apply to anyone who follows a set of standards to produce a readable instructional document. In early America, Benjamin Franklin excelled in technical writing by following standards in such documents as *The Autobiography* and *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Contemporary technical writers have guides to help them follow standards that define technical writing. These guidebooks include techniques for producing readable technical documents considered standard in the field of technical writing. Benjamin Franklin followed these standards intuitively as he created his works without the benefit of a guidebook. Franklin's innate sense of these technical standards led him to create documents that resemble contemporary documents. These efforts show that Franklin was an early-American technical writer.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although many people understand that technical writing is one of the fastest growing occupations in the twenty-first century, most are not aware that technical writers have been around for hundreds of years. Writers such as Isaac Newton and his scientific discourse, Thomas Jefferson and his political works, and Benjamin Franklin with personal invention pieces and public documents wrote technical documents with great regularity. Throughout its existence, “technical writing [has proven to be] diverse and includes many different types of correspondence, written by different types of people, in different types of professions, for different reasons” (Gerson 1). Despite the diversity of the profession, the definition of the term technical writing is constant and inclusive to all writers who follow a set of defined technical standards to produce readable instructional documents.

Despite the type or reason for producing the technical document, technical writing is always the simplification of complicated information in order to convey a specific message clearly to a reader. According to John M. Lannon, “in technical writing you communicate and interpret specialized information for your readers’ practical use” (3). Each document prepared with the specific purpose of instructing a reader is considered to be a technical document. Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “technical writing both analyzes and explains in order to communicate with the reader” (1). For example, contemporary technical writers produce instructional documents on a variety of subjects that may include how to file your taxes or work a new television set.

In order to communicate effectively with a reader, it is essential for a technical writer to follow a set of standards to produce a readable technical document. The four objectives or standards followed by all technical writers include clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization. Each of these standards is important for successfully conveying a message to a reader. These essential standards are both evident and constant in modern technical writing.

Even though these standards have only recently been outlined in modern technical writing manuals by technical writers such as John M. Lannon and Sharon and Steven

Gerson, they can first be documented in America in the works of Benjamin Franklin. In a letter written by Benjamin Franklin titled “Idea of the English School,” Franklin writes that students “should be taught to express themselves clearly, concisely, and naturally, without affected Words, or high-flown Phrases” (4:106). Not only did Franklin find these standards important for early-American writing students, but Franklin’s own writing closely follows these guidelines.

Although technical writing is a popular profession in the twenty-first century, writers have been using technical communication for many years. Dating as far back as the early Republic in America, writers produced instructional documents that allowed them to convey important information on a variety of subjects in a simple fashion. Perhaps the greatest of these early-American technical writers was Benjamin Franklin. Franklin’s letters and essays thoroughly exemplify the set of technical standards held by today’s professional technical writers.

Albert Henry Smyth writes that Benjamin Franklin “had no aspirations after literary distinction” (Smyth 12). Franklin produced technical documents that included “his ideas upon philosophy and political economy, and sent them in letters to his friends, who might, if they chose, put them to public use by publishing them as pamphlets or contributing them to the proceedings of learned societies” (13). Although Franklin produced these letters for private use, many of them guided the citizens of early-America. We can assume, then, that Franklin’s writings constitute didactic discourse. His works are not horatory, but overtly instructive.

Despite the long tenure of technical writing in American culture, the terminology and documentation of technical writing standards are a relatively new concept. Although the profession itself is actually centuries old, technical writing has been deemed a new occupation created out of necessity in an increasingly technological workplace. Due to innovation in workplace materials, there is an increasing need for technical writers in the workplace. This need has caused us to create a set of jobs that fall under the title of “technical writing.” Therefore, as a profession that is taught, technical writing is a new concept. However, because there has always been a need for instructional documents, technical writers have actually existed for hundreds of years.

To this point, scholars and historians alike have failed to document the existence and usage of technical writing in early America. As a result of the lack of attention given to both the profession of technical writing and the existence of technical writers in early-America, there are limited resources to support my claim that Benjamin Franklin was an early practitioner of technical writing. However, due to the recent increase in the demand for technical writers in today's workplace, there are new technical writing textbooks, guides, and manuals produced every day. These works are updated often, with new editions being published almost yearly. These manuals and guides outline today's technical writing standards in an almost redundant fashion. For this reason, I have narrowed the immense field of technical writing manuals down to what I consider to be the two best sources for information on both the profession of technical writing and the standards followed by professional technical writers. I based my selection of these sources on the credibility of the authors, the readability of their manuals, and the overall content of the manuals.

The second chapter of this thesis, entitled "Standards for Technical Writing", identifies and defines each of the four main standards used by modern technical writers to prepare a technical document. These standards are a culmination of the most important standards for technical writing displayed in nearly all of the style guides and manuals that are produced to aid writers in instructional and workplace writing. I have examined each standard thoroughly and written an in-depth explanation of why these standards are important to the overall readability of both modern and historic technical documents. The standards that I have chosen are clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization. Each of these standards is essential to creating a readable technical document. The importance of each of these standards is thoroughly reiterated in the second chapter of this thesis. Included with each definition are some of the main techniques used by contemporary technical writers to produce clear, concise, accurate, and well-organized documents. This chapter will display the four standards for technical writing as the basis by which every technical document is produced. These standards are the essential component that is constant in both the instructional documents produced by contemporary technical writers and the documents produced by Benjamin Franklin in early-America.

The third chapter of this thesis, entitled “An Application of Contemporary Technical Standards,” includes the application of each technical writing standard to several selected works written by Benjamin Franklin in the early American period. The examples chosen for this thesis do not come from a specific style or type of document. I selected the works written by Franklin based on their relevance to the field of technical writing, as well as their overall value and usage as instructional documents. I chose to list each standard separately in chapter two under its own subheading and include selected pieces from Franklin’s works that exemplify his usage of each of the technical writing standards. Listed under each subheading are selections from Franklin’s works that display his usage of each of the relevant techniques followed by contemporary technical writers to produce a document that exemplifies that specific technical writing standard. Each example is used to show Franklin’s knowledge of the standards that make up a readable technical document and his dedication to providing readers with a readable document that follows these standards. Also, I included selections from other works about the writing of Benjamin Franklin. These works provide a further understanding of both Franklin’s dedication to providing readers with a readable instructional document, as well as his attempts to provide others with the knowledge of the set of standards that he used to create readable instructional documents. The examples provided in this chapter will provide the evidence necessary to prove that Benjamin Franklin was an early practitioner of technical writing in Colonial America.

In the final chapter, I present the final analysis of both the technical writing standards and the application of these standards to Franklin’s works. I will reestablish the basis for my thesis by iterating the importance of clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization in technical documents. This chapter will also conclude my argument that technical writing existed in early-America as well as give a summary of the evidence provided that proves my claim that Benjamin Franklin was an early-American technical writer. Through the application of modern technical standards to early American works by Benjamin Franklin, in this chapter I will draw the conclusion that Benjamin Franklin was the greatest early-American technical writer.

CHAPTER 2

STANDARDS FOR TECHNICAL WRITING

The introduction of this thesis defines technical writing as the methods by which complicated information is simplified in order to clearly convey a specific message to a reader. However, the profession of technical writing is actually based on a larger group of standards that guide the practitioners of technical writing to produce effective technical documents. These standards are outlined in technical writing textbooks and manuals written by many scholars in the technical writing field. One technical writing scholar is John M. Lannon, a professor at Southeastern Massachusetts University and a producer of many such manuals and textbooks on technical writing. Lannon, one of the leading scholars in the field, is well-known for his textbook, *Technical Writing*, 1988. Sharon Gerson, with the DeVry Institute of Technology, and Steven Gerson at Johnson Community College are also producers of a line of technical writing textbooks entitled *Technical Writing Process and Product*, 2000. These manuals provide a thorough description of the standards necessary to produce a readable technical document.

The production of technical writing manuals that include a series of technical writing standards used to guide technical writers to produce readable documents is a relatively new phenomenon. However, the actual technical writing standards have existed for many years. These standards, clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization, are particularly evident in the early American works of Benjamin Franklin. Franklin not only followed these standards closely in his own works, but also suggested that others follow these standards. In a letter Franklin writes in response to an inquiry on his ideas on governing the English school, he states that students “should be taught to express themselves clearly, concisely, and naturally, without affected Words or high-flown Phrases” (4:106). These standards are still present in technical writing textbooks and technically written documents today.

According to John M. Lannon, “all technical documents are prepared in response to some definite situation, to fill some specific need” (3). In order to fulfill its instructional or informative purpose, Lannon states that “no matter how technically appropriate your document, the audience’s needs will not be served unless your style is

readable” (56). Achieving a readable technical document involves closely following a set of writing standards used by all technical writers when preparing a document. Despite the purpose of the technical document, each document must be written clearly, concisely, and accurately and must be organized in a manner that allows the writer to display the information in a readable layout.

Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “the ultimate goal of good technical writing is clarity” (24). Clarity is essential to the effectiveness of a technical document. If a reader cannot understand the point a writer is trying to make, the overall purpose of the document is lost. John M. Lannon suggests that “a clear sentence conveys its exact meaning on the very first reading. It signals relationships among its parts, and it emphasizes the main idea” (57). This idea is not just restricted to sentences but applies to paragraphs and the entire document as well. Richard E. Amacher writes that Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* is effective “possibly because of its simpler style and greater clarity” (38). Amacher suggests that “as the first great book written in America, the *Autobiography* not only holds a unique place in literary history, but will probably remain the work by which Franklin is best known” (38). As a result of Franklin’s clarity, his *Autobiography* is considered a success in literary history and exemplifies the importance of clarity in composition.

Writing for clarity involves writing with a sense of specificity in mind. Good technical writers produce technical documents that communicate a specific purpose in a clear manner in the first production of the document. By clearly communicating the purpose of the document in the first production, technical writers can effectively avoid wasting their own personal time and their readers’ time by avoiding rewrites and further communication. Sharon and Steven Gerson suggest that “to avoid time-consuming endeavors, write for clarity” (24).

Achieving clarity in a technical document involves composing each line of the document in a detailed, easily understandable manner. In order to produce readable or clear material, technical writers compose their documents according to a short list of guidelines. Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “one way to achieve clarity is by supplying specific, quantified information” (24). By providing specific details in a technical document, a writer will avoid unclear meanings and diverse interpretations of

the material. In technical writing, “if you write using vague, abstract adjectives or adverbs, your readers will interpret these words in different ways” (24). Avoiding vague language and providing specific details about the subject at hand will result in much clearer interpretations of a document.

Technical writers ensure they are providing adequate detail by applying the reporter’s questions to the entire document. John M. Lannon writes that “any sentence in workplace writing should have one meaning only, should allow for one interpretation” (57). If the document provides enough specific information to answer the reporter’s questions, it will avoid ambiguity and portray one meaning. By providing who, what, when, where, why, and how, technical writers can specify the exactness of the point they are trying to make. Clarity is easily achieved when a reader can find specific details that adequately respond to the reporter’s questions. By answering these questions, technical writers can be assured that they are providing enough of the specific details necessary for the reader to clearly understand the purpose of the document.

Providing specific details is an important guideline to follow when preparing a document for clarity. However, if the words that a writer chooses to use when expressing the purpose at hand are difficult to define, then the overall meaning of the document can be lost. It is important for technical writers to use easily understandable words when conveying a message to readers. According to Sharon and Steven Gerson, it is good for technical writers to “write to express, not to impress; write to communicate not to confuse” (26). By avoiding obscure words, abbreviations, and jargon, a paper will be much easier for the average reader to understand. If a reader can easily decipher the message a writer is trying to communicate, then the writer has successfully written a clear technical document.

Lannon writes that “in a coherent document, everything sticks together; each sentence builds on the previous sentence, and looks ahead to the following sentence” (61). Although using easily understandable words is a good practice to follow when preparing a technical document, if the arrangement of these words is not coherent, then a reader can still lose the purpose of the document. In an instructional sentence, “to provide readers with a forecast, place the [action] verb in that instruction at the beginning” (61). When a technical writer places the action verb at the beginning of an instruction, the

sentence becomes active rather than passive, and the readers have a clearer understanding of the action necessary to complete that instruction.

Arranging each sentence in the active voice is an important step when preparing a technical document for clarity. John M. Lannon describes the construction of an active sentence by stating that “the active voice is more direct, concise, and forceful than the passive voice” (62). Technical documents often include the actor performing the action rather than having the primary source of the sentence being acted upon. Technical writers use the active voice to avoid evasiveness and portray a sense of responsibility in instructional documents. Using the active voice is also a good way for writers to eliminate unclear indefinite pronouns that often cause confusion in technical documents.

Active voice is not only a tool used by technical writers for clarity; it is also used to aid in the conciseness of a technical document. Sharon and Steven Gerson write that “passive constructions are often wordy” (30). By avoiding the passive voice, technical writers can eliminate the use of helping verbs that cause wordiness and redundancy in technical documents. After establishing a clear understanding of the purpose at hand, Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “the second major goal of technical writing is conciseness” (30). According to the Gersons, “if you write concisely, providing thorough detail in fewer words, you can save yourself time and take up less of your readers’ time” (31). Also, concise documents are easier to follow and comprehend.

Composing a concise document without losing the meaning or overall content of a document can be a difficult task. However, it is important for instructional documents to provide specific information in as few words as possible in order to give readers the information they need without losing their attention. According to John M. Lannon, “a concise message conveys most information in fewest words. It is highly informative, but not cluttered” (68). Albert Henry Smyth writes that Benjamin “Franklin’s care for the purity of language, and his nice precision in the use of words, constantly appear in his correspondence” (39). Franklin displayed in his works a specific appreciation for providing the reader with a clear and concise structure that allowed the reader to obtain the meaning of the document easily. Providing necessary details in a concise manner is important to the overall usefulness and readability of a technical document.

In order to achieve conciseness in a technical document, many technical writers focus on limiting paragraph length. Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “an excessively long paragraph is ineffective” (31). Although the exact number of necessary words or lines in a paragraph is completely arbitrary, the Gersons suggest that “a paragraph in a technical document should consist of no more than six lines or no more than 50 words” (31). By limiting paragraph length it is easier for a reader to grasp key elements in each paragraph and string each thought together to understand the overall purpose of the document. Separating key thoughts and elements in a technical document by inserting paragraph breaks is an effective way to maintain a reader’s attention. John M. Lannon suggests, “don’t use the whole phrase when one word will do” (69). By avoiding needless phrases, a writer can easily shorten paragraph length. Paragraph breaks give readers time between each thought to contemplate the main idea of the previous section and prepare to combine the content of that section to the following paragraph.

The easiest way to limit paragraph length and create overall conciseness in a technical document is to limit sentence length. There are several ways to shorten sentences. Avoiding passive voice in technical documents and writing with the active voice is an effective way to eliminate several problems that cause wordiness in sentences. One of the problems solved by writing in the active voice is the elimination of needless sentence openers such as “there is” or “it.” Also, by having the actor perform the action, technical writers avoid needless prefaces and repetition in sentences. Perhaps the most obvious and effective way to shorten the length of a sentence is to avoid redundancy by making sure that you are not stating the same thing twice in the sentence. John M. Lannon states that “unnecessary repetition of words or phrases can clutter your writing and dilute your meaning” (70). By eliminating redundancy in a document, a writer can provide readers with not only a much more concise document, but also with a clearer document.

The length of sentences and the length of entire documents can often be shortened by eliminating excessively long words. In reference to an example listed in their text, Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “in addition to the length of the example paragraph, the writing is flawed because the paragraph is filled with excessively long words and sentences” (32). In this analysis of their example paragraph, the Gerson’s are

suggesting that if a technical document includes excessively long paragraphs, words, and sentences, then the document is “flawed.” Many excessively long words are words that can be shortened down to a root word by eliminating useless suffixes and prefixes and writing each sentence in a more direct manner. It is also important for technical writers to avoid using long, hard-to-define words that could cause lengthy sentences and confusion for readers. John M. Lannon writes, “adding needless words can obscure your meaning” (68). Eliminating difficult words and needless words are two ways that technical writers can provide readers with a more concise document.

Although clarity and conciseness are the primary objectives in technical writing, if a technical document is written incorrectly, grammatically or textually, then the purpose of the document can be lost. It is perhaps just as important for a technical writer to produce a technical document that is accurate in grammar and exact in text as it is to produce clear ideas in a concise manner. Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “to be effective, your technical writing must be accurate” (37). Technical writers avoid losing credibility by providing factual details in a document that is written in a grammatically correct format.

“Accuracy in technical writing requires that you proofread your text” (Gerson 37). In “Idea of the English School,” Franklin states in reference to the works written by the students that “these essays should all pass under the master’s eye, who will point out their faults and put the writer on correcting them” (4:107). Franklin is emphasizing the importance of accuracy in compositions by stating that it is essential for students to have their work proofread by their teacher. Perhaps the most effective method of producing an accurate document is to have someone else read your work. According to Sharon and Steven Gerson,

We miss errors in our own writing for two reasons. First, we make the error because we don’t know any better. Second, we read what we think we wrote, not what we actually wrote. Another reader might help you catch errors. (38)

Technical writers strive for accuracy when producing a technical document. Therefore, most technical writers have each document proofread several times before submitting it.

Maintaining accuracy in a technical document is perhaps the most important step for a technical writer. If a document is not accurately written, a writer may lose both the meaning of the document and credibility. Although proofreading is good way to eliminate grammatical inaccuracies and sometimes factual inaccuracies, technical writers find that other precautions must be taken to avoid falsehoods and half truths. It is important to “be sure your conclusions are based on adequate evidence” (Lannon 87). By eliminating unsupported generalizations from a document, technical writers can be sure they are protecting their credibility. Sharon and Steven Gerson write,

If you commit errors in your technical writing, your readers will think one of two things about you and your company: (a) they’ll conclude that you are stupid, or (b) they’ll think that you’re lazy. In either situation, you lose. (39)

This statement provides a further understanding of the consequences technical writers might face if they fail to provide accurate information. Without providing the correct information, a technical writer’s credibility is always at stake. Another way for technical writers to ensure their credibility is to avoid vast overstatements. Many “writers lose credibility when they exaggerate to make a point” (Lannon 87). Writing each document using specific facts and exact information from documented sources to support each claim is a good way for technical writers to avoid any discrepancies in an instructional document.

The effectiveness of a technical document is not only contingent upon providing readers with clear, concise, and accurate material. Technical writers must also display information in a readable format. Richard Amacher writes in reference to the organizational skills of Benjamin Franklin that “almost all of his works reveal such a well-developed sense of part-whole structure that they make excellent exercises in literary analysis for beginners” (36). Proper organization of instructional materials is important to portraying the exact meaning of a document. Sharon and Steven Gerson state that “as the writer, you can’t haphazardly throw words on the page and expect readers to understand you clearly” (39). John M. Lannon writes “[worthwhile] content also must be accessible: easily graspable by readers. Any reader approaches a message with definite expectations as well as for its content” (39). The overall organization of a

technical document is important for conveying accurate instructions successfully to readers.

When organizing a technical document, “you should order that information on the page logically, allowing your readers to follow your train of thought” (Gerson 39). John M. Lannon writes, “but thinking rarely occurs in a neat, predictable sequence, meaning that writers cannot merely record their thoughts in the original order” (39). For this reason, Lannon suggests that “the material must instead be shaped into an organized unit of meaning” (39). However, “no one method of organization always works” (Gerson 39). There are several types of organizational patterns that technical writers use when creating an instructional document. These patterns include spatial organization, chronological organization, importance-based organization, comparison and contrast organization, and problem-and-solution-based organization. Each pattern serves a different purpose for technical writers. Spatial organization allows a writer to provide a visual description of objects from a directional point of view. Chronological organization is a time-based organization that allows a writer to provide information in a step-by-step format. Importance based organization is used to denote a list of instructions or issues based on the prominence of each selection of data at hand. Technical writers may use comparison and contrast organization to show the similarities and differences between certain items. Problem and solution organization, also known as experiment and result organization, is used by technical writers to display scientific or business material easily.

Each organizational pattern is used by technical writers to provide readable information in a format that supports the information at hand. However, organizing the material within the document can be just as important as the overall organizational pattern. Technical writers use creative methods to ensure they are providing information in a readable format within the document. One method that writers use is supplying information in charts and graphics. The use of visual aids in a technical document is often necessary to aid in the clarity and conciseness of the overall project. Sharon and Steven Gerson write that “visual aids allow you to provide large amounts of information in a small space” (201). They also explain that “visual aids can clarify complex information” (201). Visual aids provide technical writers with an organizational tool that can help them with the overall clarity, and conciseness of the document.

The technical standards provided in this chapter are essential to creating a readable technical document. Clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization together provide the reader with information that is easy to understand, quickly obtainable, truthful, and well-devised. Each of these standards has been constant and well-documented in modern workplace documents. However, the existence of these standards can be traced back to beginnings of American society in the early Republic. Although the profession of technical writing is centered on modern technology such as computers and home entertainment devices, the innovative nature of early America made it essential for writers to provide readable documents to explain processes and usages of materials devised to provide a greater quality of living. The second chapter of this thesis will provide an application of these modern technical standards to early technical documents written by Benjamin Franklin. Through the application of these standards, I will provide exemplification necessary to prove the existence of technical writing in early America.

CHAPTER 3

APPLICATION OF CONTEMPORARY TECHNICAL STANDARDS

Benjamin Franklin “wrote much, but always with a present and practical purpose” (Smyth 12). Franklin successfully relays his purpose in each of his compositions by using many of the same standards modern day technical writers use in workplace documents. Albert Henry Smyth writes that Benjamin Franklin “was the best American writer [and] a master of plain and vigorous English” (12). John M. Lannon suggests that in technical writing, “plain talk is always better than deception” (87). Franklin writes his compositions clearly, concisely, and accurately, and he organizes each document for maximum readability.

Benjamin Franklin’s technical documents appear in several different formats. Richard E. Amacher writes, “the single format that Franklin used more often than any other in his writing was that of the letter” (129). Franklin wrote “his ideas upon philosophy and political economy, and sent them in letters to his friends, who might, if they chose, put them to public use by publishing them as pamphlets or contributing them to the proceedings of learned societies” (Smyth 12). Franklin’s letters are actually technical documents that include his scientific findings, responses to public inquiries, and personal endeavors. Although Franklin produces many of his ideas in letter format, he is also well known for his published works. Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richards Almanac* and the *Autobiography* are two examples of his devotion to readability and technical style. Franklin composes each document with a specific purpose in mind and presents his materials in a readable format that follows a set of technical standards that closely resemble the standards used by today’s technical writers.

Application of Clarity

The first and perhaps the most important technical writing standard is clarity. Clarity in a technical document allows the writer to produce written information with a purpose that the reader can obtain easily. Benjamin Franklin’s documents epitomize the standard of clarity. Many of his works rely on his ability to convey a message clearly. Despite the fact that Franklin had no interest in literary recognition, he understood the

importance of producing a clear, readable document that could easily instruct future readers on the subject at hand. Richard E. Amacher writes, “one of the strongest contributions to Franklin’s learning to write well was his ability to think clearly; even as a young boy he was able to think and write clearly” (35). The following selections are examples from Benjamin Franklin’s letters, essays, and published works that prove he was aware of the importance of clarity in his documents and produced them in a way that resembles the standard of clarity followed by contemporary technical writers.

Many contemporary technical writers are employed to write scientifically, based on the descriptions of scientific experiments or the proper way to use electronic materials. Therefore, the most obvious technical documents Benjamin Franklin composed are his letters to Peter Collinson on his electrical experiments. Peter Collinson, a Quaker friend who lived in England, is responsible for spreading some of Franklin’s work on electricity to the masses. Richard E. Amacher explains, “Collinson read these letters on electricity to the Royal Society and published some of them in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*” (140). A good example of Franklin’s use of technical standards to compose a document is the third letter written to Peter Collinson dated September 1, 1747. This letter contains a numbered list of observations Franklin made while performing several experiments with M. Muschenbrock’s bottle. Franklin also includes the experiments that confirmed his observations.

Franklin’s letter to Collinson is an excellent example of clarity in several ways. First, Benjamin Franklin was a master of providing the specific details necessary to arrive at a clear understanding of his point. In the second section of this letter, he describes the observation that he made while performing an experiment on M. Muschenbrock’s bottle. Franklin writes:

At the same time that the wire and top of the bottle is electrised *positively* or *plus*, the bottom of the bottle is electrised *negatively* or *minus*, in exact proportion: i.e. whatever quantity of electrical fire is thrown in at top, an equal quantity goes out of the bottom. (13)

In this passage, Franklin includes specific details about the type and amount of electrical charge or “fire” that occurred inside the glass bottle when electricity was applied to create an electrical current. Franklin uses specific detail to answer the reporter’s questions what,

where, when, and how to display the exact reaction that occurred inside the bottle when electricity was applied. He uses italics to further clarify the type of charge, using easily understandable words to show whether it was a negative or positive, plus or minus reaction that occurred at each end of the bottle.

Directly below the previous statement in section two of the third letter to Peter Collinson, Franklin includes a further description of the amount of charge distributed on both ends of the bottle to clarify the exact proportions of the charge at each end. Franklin explains:

To understand this, suppose the common quantity of electricity in each part of the bottle, before the operation begins is equal to 20; and at every stroke of the tube, suppose a quantity equal to 1 is thrown in; then, after the first stroke, the quantity contain'd in the wire and upper part of the bottle will be 21, in the bottom 19. (13)

Franklin includes this example in his letter to clarify exactly what amount of charge will occur at each end of the bottle when electricity is applied to the tube. By providing these details, Franklin advances the chances that Mr. Collinson would clearly understand his observations.

After Franklin displays his observations on electricity, he lists in detail the experiments he used to confirm his observations. In each of his experiments, Franklin uses active voice and short sentences to clearly and briefly display the actions he took to perform each experiment. For example, in experiment I, Franklin writes:

Place an electrised phial on wax; a small cork-ball suspended by a dry silk thread held in your hand, and brought near to the wire, will first be attracted, and then repelled: when in this state of repellency, sink your hand, that the ball may be brought towards the bottom of the bottle; it will be there instantly and strongly attracted, 'till it has parted with its fire. (16)

Franklin uses active verbs in the description of each experiment both to clearly describe each step and shorten the overall length of his paragraphs and sentences. Another example of Franklin's use of active voice occurs in experiment III, where Franklin writes "then electricise the bottle, and place it on wax" (16). In this sentence, Franklin has the actor, the reader, performing an action, thus allowing Franklin to explain the action in a

clear manner. Franklin's letters to Collinson led to the further advances in the studies on electricity. If Benjamin Franklin had failed to produce his studies in a clear and readable format, those advances may not have occurred.

The purpose of Franklin's letters on electricity is understood to be a correspondence between two learned men who share a desire to experiment and further increase the quality of living for residents of the colonies. Franklin also takes great care to explain his efforts thoroughly, using specific details and easily understandable terms to ensure the clarity of the documents at hand. Franklin takes great care to preserve the clarity of these documents so that future readers may easily perform and understand the experiments he describes. Franklin clearly outlines each step of his experiments and provides a written description of the necessary items to perform the experiments much the same way a contemporary technical editor may outline an experiment for an engineering project or medical study.

Franklin's dedication to clarity extends through all of his works. In the fall of 1750 the trustees from the English Academy wrote an inquiry to Franklin requesting that he produce a document that contained his ideas on governing the English school. In 1751, Franklin published his ideas in a document entitled "Idea of the English School, Sketch'd out for the Consideration of the Trustees of the Philadelphia Academy." This work was accompanied by a sermon written and delivered by Rev. Richard Peters that reviewed the establishment of the institution and included a copy of the Constitutions of the Academy.

In his "Idea of the English School," Benjamin Franklin writes that students "should be taught to express themselves clearly, concisely, and naturally, without affected Words, or high-flown Phrases" (4: 106). Franklin's writing itself mirrored this sentiment. In the opening section of his composition listed as *First or lowest Class*, Franklin writes:

Let the first Class learn the English Grammar Rules, and at the same time let particular Care be taken to improve them in Orthography. Perhaps the latter is best done by Pairing the Scholars, two of those nearest equal in their Spelling be put together; let these strive for Victory, each propounding Ten Words every Day to the other be spelt. (102)

In this section, and throughout the other sections, Franklin clearly states his goals for each class by answering the reporter's questions. In the heading of each section, and in the first line of the first section, Franklin answers who or when by telling us that the first class would be performing the task at hand. In the next line Franklin explains that the class will learn "Orthography," or the answer to what the class will be doing. Next he suggests a spelling contest between two students as the answer to how the students will learn orthography. Finally, Franklin states why the students should learn to spell:

'Tis a Shame for a Man to be so ignorant of this little Art, in his own Language, as to be perpetually confounding Words of like sound and different Significations; the Consciousness of which Defect, makes some Men, otherwise of good Learning and Understanding, averse to Writing even a common Letter. (102)

Franklin's composition on the English school provides specific details about the curriculum for each class by answering the reporter's questions. By providing specific details, Franklin enables himself to create a clear document that allows for only one meaning to each statement about the school. Also, Franklin uses easily understandable language to allow his readers to determine the meaning of his composition without allowing them to misinterpret the words or his proposed instructions for educating the students of the English school. Franklin's outline of the core curriculum for each grade level can easily be compared to a contemporary training manual written for an educational environment. Workplace writers often find themselves drafting training manuals to educate trainers on how to instruct other employees.

Before July 21, 1775, Benjamin Franklin wrote his "Proposed Articles of the Confederation." This document outlines what Franklin believed to be the most important ideas on what a constitution governing the united colonies should contain. Due to the importance of this document, it was essential for Franklin to produce a clearly written work. Franklin uses specific details and easily understandable words to outline each governing article for the future nation. In the second article, Franklin writes:

The said United Colonies hereby severally enter into a firm League of Friendship with each other, binding themselves and their Posterity, for

Defence and the Security of their Liberties and Propertys, the Safety of their Persons and Families, and their mutual and general welfare. (22:122)

Here Franklin provides specific detail about the future union between the colonies and their obligations to defend each other's rights. He uses easily understandable language to define a complex obligation and plain English and specific details throughout this entire document to establish clearly the governing rules for the union between the colonies.

Franklin writes his version of the articles with the specific purpose in mind to instruct the members of the union on all of the rights entrusted to them and produces the articles in a readable format. In article III of the proposed articles, Franklin writes:

That each Colony shall enjoy and retain as much as it may think fit of its own present Laws, Customs, Rights, Privileges, and peculiar Jurisdictions within its own Limits; and may amend its own Constitution as shall seem best to its own Assembly or Convention. (22:122)

Within this passage Franklin identifies the individual rights of each member or state in the union. In this article, as in all of the other articles, Franklin adequately answers the reporter's questions to clarify his points. Franklin answers the question of who with "each Colony," the what with the retaining of rights; the when is understood to be at the time of the union, and the where and how would be within each state's constitution. Franklin uses clarity in this composition much the same way a contemporary technical writer would draft a political document.

In early America, most citizens were constantly exposed to the teachings of the Bible. Franklin himself took interest in the Christian teachings; however, "he was impatient with verbal archaisms and obscurities; [and] he could not resist improving whatever he encountered" (15: 300). Franklin's temptation to edit most everything he read had no limitations. It is uncertain exactly when Benjamin Franklin wrote his revision of the "Lord's Prayer;" however, after reading it, Franklin decided to make a clearer version of the prayer. Franklin includes in his revision of this document a fully revised version of the prayer, along with a detailed explanation justifying his revisions. Franklin numbers each section of the prayer to display the changes he made.

Franklin revises the "Lord's Prayer" primarily for clarity. In section five of the revised prayer, Franklin writes, "Provide for us this Day as thou has hitherto daily done"

(15: 301). The original version of the prayer reads, “Give us this day our daily bread” (301). This revision, although much longer, is still written in active voice and eliminates much of the obscure and misleading language in the original version. In his explanation, Franklin revises his document as follows: “Give us what is ours, seems to put in a Claim of Right, and to contain too little of the grateful Acknowledgment and Sense of Dependance that becomes Creatures who live on the daily Bounty of their Creator” (302). He revises this section to clarify that we depend upon God for everything. Franklin believed that the old version contained an implication of independence and separation from God. He also revises portions of the prayer to include more detail. Section four of the old prayer reads, “Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven” (302). Franklin revises this section with more detail as, “May thy Laws be obeyed on Earth as perfectly as they are in Heaven” (302). Franklin’s revision of the “Lord’s Prayer” contains specific details and words that are much easier to comprehend and clearly portrays the meaning behind the words.

Benjamin Franklin was not only interested in the revision of existing documents for clarity, he also created documents to provide his friends with the proper instructions on how to perform specific tasks. In a letter written to his friend Oliver Neale, Benjamin Franklin described to his friend the proper way to teach oneself how to swim. His “The Art of Swimming” is a letter responding to his friend’s suggestion that it is too late in life for him to learn to swim. Franklin writes, “I cannot be of opinion with you, that it is too late in life for you to learn to swim” (qtd. in Sargent 309). After refuting his friend’s idea that it is too late for him to take up swimming, Franklin proceeds to give instructions to Oliver Neale on how he may learn to swim:

Choosing a place where the water deepens gradually, walk coolly into it till it is up to your breast, then turn round, your face to the shore, and throw an egg into the water between you and the shore. It will sink to the bottom, and be easily seen there, as your water is clear. It must lie in water so deep as that you cannot reach it to take it up but by diving for it. (310)

In this section from Franklin’s letter to Neale, Franklin uses the active voice to explain clearly to Neale the process of learning to swim to the bottom of a body of water in order to retrieve an egg. Franklin allows the actor to perform the action in this example and

uses easily understandable words to form his directions into a clear instruction. This shows Franklin's ability to write instructions in much the same way a contemporary technical writer may provide instructions on performing a task in a workplace setting.

Benjamin Franklin's consciousness of clarity is evident in his works. Franklin not only creates his own works using active voice, answering reporter's questions to clarify statements, and using specific details to provide information that leads to an immediate understanding of his purpose, but he also revises other people's works for clarity. Franklin's determination to provide a clear, readable document is easily comparable to the obsession contemporary technical writers and editors have with modern workplace documents. Franklin, like contemporary technical writers, understood the necessity to provide readers with an easily understandable document in order to portray important information adequately.

Application of Conciseness

After clarity, it is important for technical writers to be concise with their compositions. Conciseness in a technical document allows the writer to provide as much information as necessary without losing the reader's attention. In the previous section, I offered several selections from Franklin's works that exemplify his use of active voice, reporter's questions, and specific information. This section will provide examples from Franklin's works that display his use of active voice and shorter sentences to provide concise information without losing the purpose and meaning of the document.

Franklin adequately uses conciseness in his documents in much the same way that contemporary technical writers might use conciseness to save time and money. In the following example examined previously for clarity, from Franklin's experiment I on electricity, he writes:

Place an electrised phial on wax; a small cork-ball suspended by a dry silk thread held in your hand, and brought near to the wire, will first be attracted, and then repelled: when in this state of repellency, sink your hand, that the ball may be brought towards the bottom of the bottle; it will be there instantly and strongly attracted, 'till it has parted with its fire.
(Experiments 16)

In this example, Franklin uses the active voice to not only describe the steps of the experiment clearly, but also to make his comments concise. Franklin allows the actor, understood, to perform the action, “place,” in the first line of the example. Franklin describes the actions performed by the actor in as few words as necessary to describe the events that take place in the experiment without losing the purpose of the document. Technical writers often use the active voice to eliminate wordiness in any type of instructional document. Franklin’s instructional documentation of his experiment on electricity is comparable to instructional documents produced in workplace environments today.

In an example from Franklin’s “The Art of Swimming,” Franklin instructs, “then plunge under it with your eyes open, throwing yourself towards the egg, and endeavoring by the action of your hands and feet against the water to get forward till within reach of it” (qtd. in Sargent 310). In this selection, Franklin is trying to convince Oliver Neale that his body is lighter than the water and “it is not so easy a thing to sink as you might imagine” (310). Franklin uses active voice in this example, and in the entirety of this letter to Oliver Neale, to provide Mr. Neale with clear and concise instructions on how to swim. Franklin’s dedication to providing adequate instructions clearly and concisely further display his knowledge and effort to provide readers with a readable document that will not waste time and effort.

Benjamin Franklin’s efforts to write in a clear and concise manner are evident in all of his works. In one of Franklin’s more popular works, *Autobiography*, or his memoirs as he called them, Franklin uses technical writing techniques to transcribe his table of thirteen virtues. In this work, Franklin recounts an event in his life when he had decided “it was about this time [he] conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection” (qtd. in Sargent 183). Franklin’s virtues thoroughly exemplify the dedication he had to providing his readers with a clear, concise, and readable document. The first virtue Franklin lists is “Temperance.” Franklin writes, “Eat not to dullness; Drink not to elevation” (184). In this selection, Franklin uses the active voice to portray concise thoughts on what temperance entailed to him and to display those thoughts in a clear manner to his readers. Franklin lists the other twelve virtues in much the same manner. For example, in the final virtue Franklin writes of “Humility,” “imitate Jesus and

Socrates” (184). Franklin’s style and format are the same throughout his entire listing. He again uses the active voice and a limited amount of easily understandable words to provide a clear and concise document. Franklin provides information about his set of virtues in much the same manner a contemporary technical writer may list a set of instructions. By providing a list of instructional information in a concise manner, a technical writer is able to provide more information in fewer words.

In Franklin’s *Autobiography*, he states that “my scheme of order gave me the most trouble” (qtd. in Sargent 188). Franklin defines order by saying, “let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time” (184). Due to his toils in attempting to obtain order in his life, Franklin created a daily planner for himself to follow and keep track of his activities. Franklin outlines a page of his planner in his *Autobiography*. Above the sketch of his daily “scheme,” as he calls it, Franklin writes, “The precept of *Order* requiring that *every part of my business should have its allotted time*, one page in my little book contained the following scheme of employment for the twenty-four hours of a natural day” (187). Franklin writes this caption above the “scheme” in order to clarify the purpose of the document he is describing in the caption. This caption is written in plain and concise English and provides the reader with just enough information to explain the purpose of the sketch below.

In Franklin’s sketch of the daily planner, he places the hours of the day in the center of the page, with the period of the day, such as morning, noon, afternoon, and night, on the left side of the page, and the hourly activity is placed beside its hour on the right side of the page. In the morning hours Franklin says, “Rise, wash, and address *Powerful Goodness!* Contrive day’s business, and Take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study, and breakfast” (187). Here again, Franklin uses active voice to provide a clear and concise statement of his daily activity. Further down in the noon hours of the day, Franklin lists his activity simply as “Work” (187). This concise statement is all that is necessary for him to understand the meaning of this section in his day. He shows a clear understanding of what it takes to provide readers with the least amount of information necessary to allow the reader to gain a clear understanding of the purpose of the document.

In Benjamin Franklin's revision of the "Lord's Prayer," his primary goal was to revise the document for clarity. However, in some instances, Franklin revises lines of the piece to be read in active voice. Section one of the original prayer stated "Our Father which art in Heaven" (15:301). In Franklin's revision this line appears "Heavenly Father" (301). Franklin himself said of his revision that it "is much more concise, equally expressive, and better modern English" (301). In this revision, as he did with all his works, Franklin tries to eliminate useless words from this document in order to make the purpose much more clear and concise. In some instances, Franklin expresses the importance that these two standards hold in not only his own writing, but in the writing of others as well. Much like contemporary technical writers, Franklin understood the importance of providing a clear and concise technical document.

Application of Accuracy

Equally as important as clarity and conciseness, accuracy is the standard that technical writers pay the most attention to. If a writer fails to provide an accurate technical document, then the writer's credibility may be lost. The standard of accuracy includes the revision of a technical document not only for punctuation and grammar errors, but also for content and fact errors. Richard Amacher explains that during Franklin's process of composing the *Autobiography*, "in the actual manuscript he left one half (one side) of the page open for additions and corrections" (41). This verifies Franklin's interest in producing an accurate document. The following examples are selections from Franklin's sentiments about his own work and the work of others that provide an understanding of his determination to stress the importance of accuracy and revision in composition.

Benjamin Franklin's letters on electricity to Peter Collinson were collected and later published in a bound edition. In this edition, Franklin revises his documents and provides explanatory notes and an advertisement page for the collection. Franklin states in the opening pages of the bound edition, "many errors in the preceding editions, are now corrected; some of the Letters which had been transposed, are restored to their proper places; and sundry passages are more fully explained by notes" (Advertisement). Including this statement in his bound edition, Franklin displays his dedication to providing all information necessary to allow for only one interpretation of his writings on

electricity. In the footnotes of this edition Franklin includes a statement to clarify further what occurred in the experiment in section two of his works, stating, “what is said here, and after, of the top and bottom of the bottle, is true of the inside and outside surfaces and should have been expressed” (Franklin 13). The inclusion of this statement in the footnotes shows Franklin’s dedication to accuracy by displaying his attempt to edit his material for accurate and clear understanding. Many contemporary technical writers are employed to provide descriptions of scientific material and find they must use footnotes to describe the meaning of difficult-to-understand words and situations.

In Franklin’s “Idea of the English School,” he writes, “these essays should all pass under the master’s eye, who will point out their faults and put the writer on correcting them” (4:107). Here Franklin writes to a group of trustees to inform them of what he thinks is the best way to educate students of the English school. He displays that he feels it is important for the instructor to revise the compositions provided by the students in order for them to not only learn to revise their own materials but also to seek an outside proofreader to aid them in their corrections. This exemplifies Franklin’s dedication to providing an accurate technical document that will display clear, concise, and correct information in a readable format.

Another example of Franklin’s dedication to accuracy is his revision of sayings that he includes in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Franklin borrowed many of his sayings from other sources and includes revised versions of these sayings that suited him better and worked well with his style of writing. Richard E. Amacher writes that “balance, clarity, and variety were characteristics he [Franklin] aimed at in making revisions, frequently using such rhetorical devices as metaphor, anticlimax, pun, and racy diction” (62). Franklin’s dedication to producing a document that clearly and concisely displays his purpose for writing is evident in his revision of the sayings in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Franklin produces a clear, concise, and accurate technical document without losing style, meaning, or the overall purpose of the document.

Benjamin Franklin understood the necessity to provide a clear, concise, and accurate document that would be easy to follow for his readers. His works are much like the works of modern technical writers in the sense that his compositions follow the same standards that contemporary writers follow today. Richard E. Amacher writes that “the

ingenious revisions Franklin frequently made in borrowed sayings helped very greatly to promote the success of *Poor Richard*” (64). Contemporary writers send documents through several revisions before producing them for use or publication. Franklin’s interest in revision, clarity, and conciseness is evident in his writing and can only accurately be compared to contemporary technical writers.

Application of Organization

The organization of materials is important to the consistency and overall effectiveness of a document. A successful conveyance of meaning and purpose relies on a document to provide the reader with clear, concise, and accurate information organized in a logical format. Richard Amacher suggests that Benjamin “Franklin did take great care with matters of literary form, plan, and design” (36). In fact, Franklin’s organizational methods closely resemble the methods used by contemporary technical writers. Modern organizational patterns used in technical documents include spatial organization, chronological organization, importance-based organization, comparison and contrast organization, and problem-and-solution based organization. Many of Franklin’s works exemplify one or more of these organizational patterns, allowing his readers to understand thoroughly the purpose of his documents.

In Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, the overall organizational pattern of the document is a chronological-based organization. The *Autobiography* was written in two separate sections, and Franklin began writing the first section of this work in 1771 at the age of sixty-five. In this section Franklin documents, in chronological order, the events of his life up to 1730. This section was “intended for his son and for Franklin’s immediate family; it covered about a third of his list of topics” (Amacher 41). Because of the start of the Revolutionary War, it would be thirteen years before Franklin would undertake the continuance of the second part of the manuscript. It is said that Abel James persuaded Franklin to continue his efforts to complete the *Autobiography*. Despite the break in the overall flow of the document, Franklin writes it in a chronologically-based format. Franklin began his second section essentially where he left off with the first section. Without the use of a uniform organizational structure, this work could have suffered from the thirteen-year break in the writing process. Contemporary technical writers use one organizational method for each document to allow the information to stay consistent

throughout the entire document. This keeps the reader from being confused by disorganized materials.

Another example of Franklin's use of chronological-based organization is his letter to Peter Collinson. Franklin numbers each observation and each experiment in order of occurrence. He denotes each observation with Arabic numerals and each experiment with roman numerals. Franklin uses letters to denote each item used in the experiment. The letters correspond with a key that accompanies the description of the experiment. Within each experiment Franklin uses a combination of chronological and experiment-and-result organization. For example, in experiment II Franklin writes:

FIG. I. From a bent wire (a) sticking in the table, let a small linen thread (b) hang down within half an inch of the electrised phial (c). Touch the wire of the phial repeatedly with your finger, and at every touch you will feel the thread instantly attracted by the bottle. (This is best done by a vinegar cruet or some such belly'd bottle.) As soon as you draw any fire out from the upper part, by touching the wire, the lower part of the bottle draws an equal quantity in by the thread. (Experiments 16)

In this passage Franklin not only uses chronological organization to show the order in which each part of the experiment should occur but also uses the experiment and result method to display what will occur after each step of the experiment is performed.

Franklin denotes each ingredient used for the experiment with a corresponding letter. These letters corresponded to graphics, or figures, that Franklin includes with each of his letters to Collinson. Franklin notes exactly which figure corresponded with each experiment in the first line of the description. Franklin's use of graphics aid in both the clarity and organization of the letter, helping each reader understand the overall concept of the document.

Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* is as a whole written in a chronologically based organizational pattern. However, some of the charts included in the almanac are written and organized in a spatial pattern. In the almanac written for the year 1733, Franklin includes his chart of planets' motions for that year. This chart is drawn out on the fourth page of the almanac but still needed some explanation to help the reader decipher the visual aid's usage. On the fifth page of the almanac Franklin writes:

The first column shows the Days of the Month. The second shows the Week day, Sunday Letter being this Year G. The third contains the Days observ'd by the Church, the Aspects of the Planets and Judgment of the Weather; the Length, Increase, and Decrease of Days, the rising and setting of the seven Stars, &c. (The Complete 5)

Although this brief section seems to follow a chronologically based pattern, it is actually written in a spatial pattern based on its observation of the chart displayed on the previous page. Franklin explains the use of the chart as simply as possible so that he would not confuse his readers. He adequately uses spatial organization to describe the chart and its contents.

Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richards Almanac* is a well-organized literary work. He includes in this piece several recurring sections, including an article entitled "A Table for the More Ready Casting up of Coins in Pennsylvania." This section is included in several of his yearly publications of the almanac and is a basic table for monetary exchange rates for several of the European countries. Franklin's method of organization in this piece is comparison and contrast. Franklin organizes the table into five columns and designates the first column for the number of coins the reader may have. The remaining four columns are designated for pieces of eight, Spanish pistoles, English guineas, and Moidores. In the caption directly below the columns, headed "Explanation," Franklin writes:

Find your Number in the first Col. Under No. and right against the same you have the Sum of that Number of Pieces of Eight, Spanish Pistoles, English Guineas, Moidores. But if your Sum cannot be found at one View, it must be taken at two or more Operations. (The Complete 35)

Franklin's table for deciphering exchange rates is relatively self-explanatory due to the well-organized visual sketch of the table provided in the almanac. However, Franklin was aware that some of his readers would need further description of the table to understand adequately the usage of the exchange table. This determination to provide sufficient details and readable format are two of the reasons behind the great success of Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Franklin provides the reader with an easily understandable comparison and contrast method of organization, as well as a clear and concise list of

instructions to provide the reader with the necessary information for using the exchange table.

Benjamin Franklin's revision of the "Lord's Prayer" was also written in a comparison and contrast style. Franklin organizes the revision by providing first the line from the old version of the prayer and then his new and improved version directly underneath. He explains the logic for the change in a column labeled "Reasons for the Change of Expression." This column is located directly to the right side of the page just to the right of the new and old versions of each line. Benjamin Franklin uses this organizational pattern in much the same way a contemporary technical writer would display the comparison and contrast of two different scientific experiments on the same subject.

Hundreds of years before the first technical writer composed a workplace document, memo, or web page, Benjamin Franklin was applying standards and creating technical documents based on all types of subjects and for different forms of media. Benjamin Franklin's writings, no matter what form or purpose, all followed a set of technical standards that closely resembled the standards or objectives used by today's technical writers. Franklin himself explains in his list of ideas for the English School that students of writing "should be taught to express themselves clearly, concisely, and naturally, without affected Words, or high-flown Phrases" (4: 106). Here Franklin provides us with a look at exactly what objectives he held in his own writing. Franklin composes each document for clarity, conciseness, accuracy through revision, and with a definite organizational pattern in mind, creating technical documents long before the occupation of technical writer was ever conceived.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Technical writing is more than just a twenty-first century innovation. Although the profession itself is a new field, the standards that form the basis for technical writing have existed for hundreds of years. Technical writing is broad enough to include any writer who creates a document based on a defined set of standards that guide the writer to produce a readable instructional document. In this thesis I have defined the primary technical standards as clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization. Also, this thesis identifies the existence of these technical writing standards as far back as the early American Republic by using examples from Benjamin Franklin's works. Although other writers from the early Republic could possibly be identified as technical writers, Benjamin Franklin can easily be identified as the greatest of these early-American instructional writers.

Benjamin Franklin's writings thoroughly followed the four main standards defined by this thesis. Each of his works clearly stated its purpose. His writings were prepared in a concise and accurate manner and organized in a readable design that could easily be followed. Franklin also possessed the mind set of a technical writer. He presented his documents with the knowledge that his writings would instruct others. He embraced this idea and prepared each line of every document carefully and technically. Franklin also possessed the experience necessary to allow him to write on a variety of subjects. Based on the examples provided in this thesis, Franklin's willingness to instruct, and his writing versatility, Benjamin Franklin is easily defined as the greatest early-American technical writer.

As stated earlier in this thesis, Benjamin Franklin "wrote much, but always with a present and practical purpose" (Smyth 12). Although Franklin's subject matter varied, he always produced his documents with the idea of instructing others. Richard E. Amacher writes that "if we consider the general kind of writer Franklin represents, we may still feel somewhat nonplussed because he remains so versatile as to seem completely unclassifiable" (36). Franklin's subject matter varied; however, his style always remained

the same. The one constant in Franklin's writing is his dedication to producing a readable document.

Benjamin Franklin's documents exemplify the standards held by contemporary technical writers. The most important standard that contemporary technical writers strive to achieve is clarity. Albert Henry Smyth writes about Franklin's writing style, "he was simple, clear, and direct in his experiments as in his style" (49) Most of the language in Franklin's works is presented in active voice. Franklin uses active voice to clarify his purpose in all of his literary works and also to aid in the conciseness of his documents. Further, his documents use the active voice to eliminate useless helping verbs and phrases. Albert Henry Smyth quotes Franklin as saying, "Nothing should be expressed in two words that can be as well expressed in one" (37). This statement shows Franklin's knowledge of the clarity and usefulness of a concise document.

Franklin's dedication to producing a readable document is also evident in his refusal to produce an inaccurate document. Smyth writes, "The severity of his criticism on himself lends interest to his opinion of the criticisms of others" (37). The strictness Franklin applied to his own literary works is a display of the importance Franklin put on providing readers with an accurate document. Richard E. Amacher writes that "as a writer Franklin generally concerned himself greatly with the problem of order, not only in the main parts of his composition but also in the smaller and finer elements of the sentence itself" (158). Franklin's works are carefully organized into an easily distinguishable format. Franklin's organizational strategies can only accurately be compared to the organizational techniques used by contemporary technical writers.

As stated earlier in this thesis, Franklin himself writes in his "Idea of the English School" that the students of the school "should be taught to express themselves clearly, concisely, and naturally, without affected Words, or high-flown Phrases" (4:106). This shows that Franklin understood the importance of clarity, conciseness, accuracy, and organization to a readable document. He not only followed these standards in his own writing, but saw the importance in teaching these standards to others. Albert Henry Smyth states that "Franklin's writings have two objects: to instruct in principles of science and to influence conduct" (43). Franklin was constantly aware that others would

be subjected to his writings, and because of this, he presented his material in a clear, concise, accurate, and organized format.

Although Benjamin Franklin never received contemporarily-defined technical writing training, he possessed an innate understanding of the elements that were eventually incorporated into the standards of a thriving field. Franklin's innate understanding of the standards necessary to produce a readable document, his knowledge of purpose and audience, and his overall dedication to producing a clear, concise, accurate, and well-organized technical document separate him from other early-American writers as the greatest early-American technical writer.

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