Author's Toolkit

Writing Better Technical Papers

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Usually it's the "small" words that perform mighty functions within an English sentence. In technical writing, two such little heroes, which sound very similar but have very distinct tasks, are "then" and "than."

"then" or "than"?

There are various pairs of words that can confuse writers and trick spell-checking software: stationary/stationery, proceed/precede, effect/affect, adopt/adapt, lose/loose, from/form, does/dose, personal/personnel, device/devise, etc.

So the first precaution to take with "then" and "than" is to understand their meanings and not use one for the other.

The word "then" functions as an adverb indicating a subsequent action or state:

○ The solution was then cooled to 120°C.

As an adjective, it indicates a previous role:

○ In 1995, the then president of Underpine Industries decided to enter the robot market.

It is sometimes a noun for "at that time":

○ No other change appeared then.

But that usage is mainly conversational.

A more common conversational usage that should be strictly avoided in technical writing is the use of "then" to mean "therefore/so":

○ A: It's raining now. B: Then bring an umbrella.

✗ The first-stage filtering did not sufficiently reduce the candidates, then we had to...

○ The first-stage filtering did not sufficiently reduce the candidates, so we had to...

As the second and third examples illustrate, the contexts of using "then" as "next" and as "so" tend to be very similar; thus increasing the chances of misleading your reader.

The word "than" is used as a conjunction (like "and/but/so"), generally to show a comparison:

○ At stress points, polymer structures provide greater flexibility than aluminum parts.

Another common comparative usage is to show that a measured quantity exceeds a

specified value:

○ After the additional training session, recall improved by more than 60%.

Although it's not strictly incorrect, in writing you should avoid this conversational usage:

✗ Our approach is different than that of Tai et al.

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Self-plagiarism Revisited

Earlier this year, I wrote here about the growing issue of publishers becoming stricter about "plagiarism" of previous works, as measured by software. This summer I spoke before a group of medical researchers about this.

As I mentioned in the earlier issue, achieving an acceptably low "plagiarism rating" imposes an exceptionally heavy burden on non-native authors publishing in English, who generally lack the vocabulary and flexibility in English to easily rephrase standard descriptive sentences.

From my most recent look at this issue, I offered my audience a few general tips. First, avoid the temptation of using "copy-paste" between documents; although a great tool, it brings a lot of old baggage from the previous file. Always be rigorous in using complete citations, even of your own work. Learn to use "iThenticate" or other online tools. Finally, inform your editor at an early stage about legitimately reused text and emphasize the key points of originality in your current submission.

I've found no "silver bullet" for avoiding this risk, but I plan to look into it more deeply.

Writing Questions? Need a conference speaker?

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Mini Quiz: What's Wrong?

- 1) We must first tackle with the problem of...
- 2) We must first tackle the problem of...
- 3) We must first deal with the problem of...

(Answers: 1) NG—incorrect use of "with" after "tackle"; 2) OK; 3) OK)