5 Common Mistakes Writers Make with Technical Info

How to Avoid Embarrassment

White Paper

Freund Associates
Technical Communication

Whether you're a technical writer or not, if you've ever been asked to write an annual report or present any other type of technical information, you should know there are some rules that apply. This paper contains tips to save you the embarrassment of making these five common mistakes:

- Not introducing a figure or table in the text
- Not labeling figures and tables
- Not arranging sections of pie charts in order
- Not making arrows or callouts on photos clearly visible
- Not attributing your sources.

1. Always introduce a figure or table in your text.

If you're planning to include a figure or table in your report, don't just paste it into your copy and make the reader try to figure out how the information relates to the discussion. Always write an introductory sentence for the figure or table.

Good examples of introductory statements:

- The foundation acquired over $3.1 million in assets during the past five years, as shown in Figure 6.
- Table 3 lists revenue and expenses for the current fiscal year.
- Figures 7, 8, and 9 illustrate U. S. unemployment trends for the past three years.

2. Always label your figures and tables.

The reader shouldn't have to figure out what the illustration is or how it relates to your topic. That's your job. After you introduce the illustration, you must provide a caption, keeping in mind that tables are labeled at the top, and figures are labeled at the bottom.

Good example of labeling table & citing source:

Table 1. Total Cost of Ownership Comparison

TCO Comparison			
Vendor A IP PBX	Vendor B Hosted IP PBX	Vendor C Converged Voice and Data	Traditional Voice/Data Service
Acquisition Costs			
Phones	$10,928	$11,248	$ -	$ -
Equipment	$12,542	$7,957	$ -	$ -
Installation	$3,864	$8,230	$115	$300
Subtotal	$27,334	$27,435	$115	$300
Monthly Recurring Costs			
Data Circuit	$20,043	$17,244	$20,043	$21,290
Usage Charges	$5,764	$ -	$ -	$16,222
Service Contract	$ -	$56,808	$5,661	$63,873
Engagement Fee	$17,033	$ -	$ -	$ -
Subtotal	$42,840	$74,052	$25,704	$101,385
TCO	$75,844	$101,487	$25,819	$101,685
Cost/Month/User	$60.19	$80.55	$20.49	$80.70

Source: Savatar SMB VoIP Study, 2006

Good example of labeling figure:
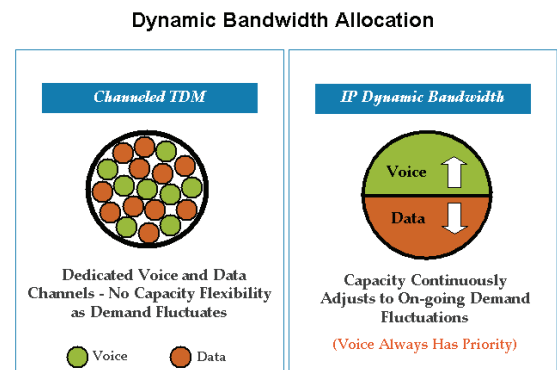
Dynamic Bandwidth Allocation

Figure 1. Real-time IP dynamic bandwidth allocation gives priority to voice traffic but makes additional data bandwidth capacity available when phone lines are not in use.

3. Always arrange sections of a pie chart clockwise, from largest to smallest.

When it comes to pie charts, "a picture is worth a thousand words" as the adage goes. You can help the reader "get the picture" by arranging sections clockwise, from largest to smallest.
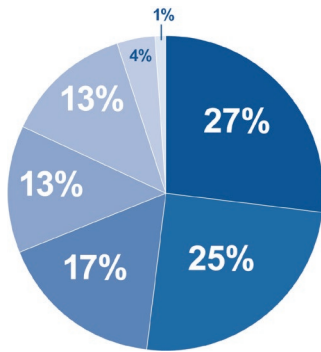
Good example of pie chart:

Figure 2. The sections of this pie are arranged clockwise, from largest to smallest, helping the reader interpret the data.
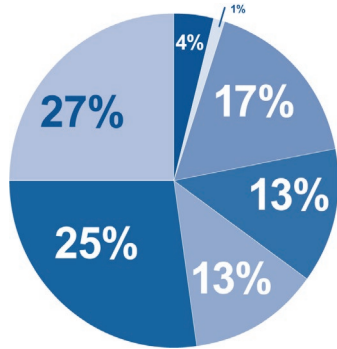
Negative example of pie chart:

Figure 3. The sections of this pie chart are arranged randomly, not clockwise from largest to smallest, making the reader sort the info.

4. Always outline arrows on photos.

An effective way to draw your reader's attention to something in a diagram or photo is to insert an arrow or "callout." But what if the arrow gets lost or "camouflaged" by the items in the photo? Try outlining the arrow in white so it is clearly visible. Note the difference in the following example:
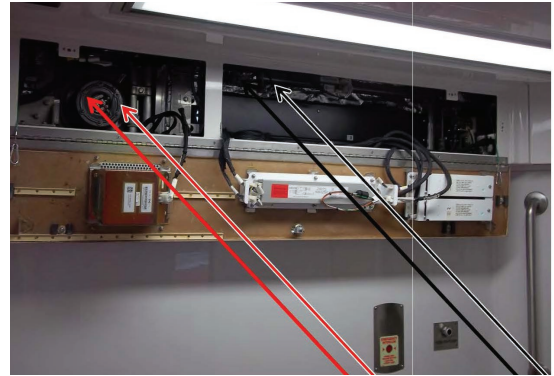

Figure 4. The black arrow gets lost in this photo, but outlining it in white helps ensure clarity. If the document is printed in black/white, changing the color to red may not work either. No matter what the color, outlining the arrow in white will always ensure clarity.

5. Always attribute your sources.

Whenever you gather technical information or data from somewhere else, you must say where you got it, either in a footnote in your text or at the bottom of the figure or table.

Good example of footnoting a source in the text:

"Recent studies demonstrate that while the vast majority of smokers (over 70%) want to quit, historically less than one in ten (<9%) are successful on their own, and less than a third (31.7%) have used evidence-based methods." [1]

[1] Rigotti NA. Treatment of tobacco use and dependence. N Engl J Med 2002;346(7):506–512.
http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6044a2.htm

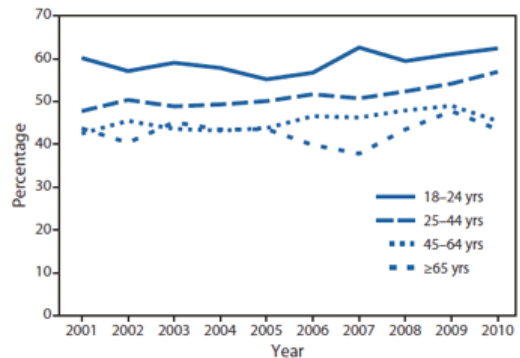### Good example of citing source below the visual:

Figure 5. Percentage of cigarette smokers aged ≥18 years who made a quit attempt by age group, 2001-2010
Source: National Health Interview Survey, United States, 2001-2010

About Freund Associates
Technical Communication

Freund Associates is a full-service communication firm specializing in technical and medical writing for business and industry. Founded in 1996 and located in northern New Jersey, Freund Associates is a certified woman-owned business that provides a tightly organized team of writers, editors, graphic designers, new media specialists, engineers, and project managers to serve clients anywhere in the United States.

Our approach to medical and technical writing can save you time, money, and worry. Freund Associates will:

- Simplify your project by providing a single point of contact. No need for you to coordinate multiple writers or resources.
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- Approach every project with knowledge of your industry and the ability to meet your specific communication challenges.
- Arrange and conduct teleconference calls or meetings with your in-house subject matter experts.
- Supervise your entire project and thoroughly review all work to ensure consistency of tone, format, and style.
- Deliver a high-quality product—on time and on budget—that can proudly bear your company name.

▶ To take the next step in writing your organization's annual report or presenting any other technical information, visit *www.freundassociates.com*, call **Dr. Annette Freund** at 201-512-0022, or email her at *afreund@freundassociates.com*.

Checklist for Reporting Technical Info

- Did you introduce every figure and table in your text?
- Did you put the title of every table at the top of the table?
- Did you put the title of every figure at the bottom of the figure?
- Did you arrange the sections of pie charts clockwise, from largest to smallest?
- Did you outline arrows on illustrations to make them more legible?
- Did you cite sources for all your data?