

ASCE Author's Guide: Writing Style

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Active versus Passive Voice

Wherever possible, use active verbs that demonstrate what is being done and who is doing it.

Instead of: The bridge was built by James Eads.

Use: James Eads built the bridge.

Instead of: Six possible causes of failure were identified in the forensic investigation.

Use: The forensic investigation identified six possible causes of failure.

Direct versus Indirect Statements

Direct statements are clear, concise, and do not wear on your reader. Indirect statements are those that begin with phrases such as “it should be noted that...” or “it is common that...” Other types of indirect statements may begin with “to be” statements such as “there are” or “it was”.

Instead of: It should be noted that the flow was interrupted by a surge...

Use: A surge interrupted the flow...

Instead of: It is common that the steel rebars are weakened by oxidation...

Use: Oxidation commonly weakens steel rebars...

Instead of: There are many reasons that concrete may fail...

Use: Concrete may fail for many reasons...

Instead of: There are three kinds of bolt that can be used in these circumstances...

Use: Three kinds of bolt can be used in these circumstances.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

An abbreviation is a shortening form of a word or phrase, such as “Jan.” for “January”, “U.S.” for “United States,” and “ASCE” for “American Society of Civil Engineers.” An acronym is formed when the abbreviation forms a pronounceable word, such as “NATO” for “North Atlantic Treaty Organization” or “AASHTO” for “American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.”

- Abbreviations and acronyms in text must be spelled out the first time that they appear in each chapter or paper, with the shortened form appearing immediately in parentheses. Thereafter, the shortened form should be used throughout the chapter.
- Several very common abbreviations (U.S. and U.K. as adjectives; DNA and PVC for nouns) do not need to be spelled out on first usage.
- Basic units of measure do not need to be spelled out on first usage. These include: ft, in., lb (customary) and m, mm, kg (SI).

Figures, Tables, and Other Supporting Materials

Elements such as figures, tables, and boxes containing lists or case studies are included to support or augment what appears in the text.

- For books, each element should be numbered consecutively with the chapter number and an Arabic numeral: Fig. 9-1, Fig. 9-2, Fig. 9-3 ...; Table 7-1, Table 7-2 ...; Box 10-1, Box 10-2 For journal articles and conference proceedings volumes, which do not have chapter numbers, the chapter number is left out: Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3....
- If a figure or table has parts, a capital or lowercase letter is used to identify the parts: Fig. 9-1A, Fig. 9-1B...; Fig. 1(a), Fig. 1(b)...
- In books, do not use subheading numbers for figures and tables. This practice is awkward and confuses readers.
- Every element must be discussed in text, with a reference to the element and its number. The first reference to a figure, table, or box is the call-out. The call-outs must be worded consistently throughout your manuscript. Spell out "Table" and abbreviate "Fig." For example: "The results of the stress tests (Fig. 1) clearly demonstrate..." and "Table 6-2 presents a range of planning options along with..."
- When your manuscript is typeset, the element will be placed on the page on which it is called out—or as soon as possible thereafter.
- Tables and figures must be numbered in the order in which they are discussed in text so that call-outs also appear in numerical order. In other words, Table 3 must be called out in text before Table 4.