Telegraphic Style – An Often Unknown, Yet Useful Writing Technique

by Raymond E. Urgo

During the 1980s while working in the aerospace and defense industry I learned of and used the technique referred to as "telegraphic style" for documenting business and technical procedures. This technique was one procedure department's required standard for writing all procedures and instructions. Although I don't always use it today, I address it in my communication courses on procedures, processes, and flow diagramming. Most of my participants have neither used nor known about this technique.

Telegraphic style is a technique of eliminating a word or words necessary for complete grammatical construction, but understood in the context. (Don't confuse this with merely eliminating unnecessary words.) An example is: "if possible" for "if it is possible". Typically the articles "a", "an", and "the" are frequently eliminated from the grammatical construction.

The formal or grammatical name for telegraphic style is "ellipsis" or "elliptical" style. The name "telegraphic" is more commonly used because it resembles the construction and sound of the wording typically found in a telegram. Most telegrams have somewhat cryptic worded messages because of the need to save the expense of being charged by the number of words in a message.

Telegraphic style can be used in any phrase or sentence construction. If used, I generally recommend the technique be applied for writing procedures or instructions only, not policy, standards, or concepts. (I define procedures and instructions as a series of step-by-step statements written in the second person, telling someone how to do something to perform a specified outcome.) Further, if telegraphic style is used, it should be applied consistently throughout a procedure or instruction as long as it does not compromise interpretation of the message by the reader.

Telegraphic has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that it may produce a speech pattern referred to as staccato. A staccato effect has abrupt, distinct elements or sounds which may give the reader a certain rhythmic momentum to read to. A definite advantage is saved space, especially in procedure tables, lists, and flowcharts. (Saving space should not be a primary reason for using it.) A disadvantage is that at times it may cause some misinterpretations by the reader of the intended message. Also, some readers may find it too cryptic.

I welcome readers' insights, knowledge, or experience on the history, application, or value of telegraphic style.

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The following table compares regular and telegraphic styles applied to the first six steps in a procedure for processing a leasing application.

Step	Regular (Non-telegraphic) Style	Telegraphic Style
1	Receive the application and verify it for the required information and the appropriate fee.	Receive and verify application for required information and appropriate fee.
2	Forward the application and the fee to the corporate office for review and further processing.	Forward application and fee to corporate for review and processing.
3	Order a credit check report within 24 hours of receipt of the application.	Order credit check report within 24 hours of receipt of application.
4	Deposit the application fee within 24 hours (or next business day) of receiving the application.	Deposit fee within 24 hours (or next business day) of receiving application.
5	Contact the current or prior landlord to confirm knowledge and good standing of the individual.	Contact current or prior landlord to confirm knowledge and good standing of individual.
6	Upon receipt of the credit report, decide whether to accept or reject the applicant according to the property's criteria for new tenants.	Upon receipt of credit report, decide whether to accept applicant according to property's criteria for new tenants.