

Techniques for Introducing Unfamiliar Terms

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This investigation identifies, classifies, and explains a wide range of techniques for introducing unfamiliar terms into a document. It enables professional writers to improve their writing. These techniques are also applicable to spoken discourse, including multimedia and interactive dialogues.

Method: The investigation employs a linguistic framework derived from applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, and eye-movement research. The framework consists of (1) the triad of term, class, and characteristic, most familiar in the context of formal definition; (2) the location of the unfamiliar term in relation to the other parts of the explanation; (3) the distinctive marking of the term, usually with quotation marks or italics; and (4) the effect of explanatory context.

Results: Certain syntactic constructions and distinctive markings assure readers that either the unfamiliar term will be explained or that an explanation of the term is not necessary for a productive reading of the text. Class-first constructions are especially versatile in introducing unfamiliar terms. Ongoing changes in reading and writing may lead to changes in the techniques used to introduce unfamiliar terms. Special cases are examined: parenthetical constructions, "so-called" as a means to introduce unfamiliar

terms, the uses of extra-linear display (above-the-line and pop-up definitions), the problem of multiple instances of unfamiliar terms in lengthy documents, and the distinctive practices we find in online help systems.

Keywords: terminology, explanation, definition, signaling, technical text

PRACTITIONER'S TAKEAWAY:

- Linguistic analysis provides a new perspective on introducing unfamiliar terms in print and online documents.
- This new perspective extends previous thinking because it is more systematic, offers deeper-level explanations, and reveals a larger number of specific techniques that writers can add to their repertoire.
- This technique makes better sense out of the practice of marking unfamiliar terms with italics and quotation marks, a practice specified but never adequately explained in style manuals.
- Its emphasis on the location of the term within the sentence and passage in which it appears is especially suited to the work of professional writers.