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THE CONCEPT OF CONSISTENCY IN WRITING AND EDITING

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ABSTRACT

Consistency is the orderly treatment of a set of linked elements, and it is a necessary characteristic of polished, highly readable prose. Consistency is either "uniform" or "harmonious," depending on whether a set of linked elements is indivisible or divisible into subsets. From the perspective of text characteristics, we can speak of semantic, syntactic, stylistic, spatial, and mechanical consistency. To deal successfully with consistency problems, technical communicators should establish patterns that are logical, evident, functional, resource efficient, and stable. Because of its importance, the concept of consistency should be more fully recognized. Indeed, consistency should be a component of any comprehensive rhetoric of technical communication.

Consistency, it is generally agreed, is a necessary characteristic of polished, highly readable prose. A document is surely impaired by such inconsistencies as the varying form of the figure references presented below:

- The gasifier, which is designed for atmospheric pressure operation, is shown in Figure 1.
- Feed coal is pulverized through 200 mesh and dried to about 1% moisture (by weight) in an Eskon ball mill pulverizer, as shown in Fig. 2.
- As depicted in Figure 3, run-of-mine coal is wet-ground in a rod mill, screened to remove less than 100 mesh particles and slurried with water.
- The schedule in fig. 4 shows the four main tasks of the contract.

While this instance of inconsistency does not confuse meaning, it will distract many readers and thereby interfere with the reading process. These readers,

moreover, will almost certainly regard this inconsistent treatment of figure references as shoddy and unprofessional, and this perception will diminish the credibility of the document, the writer, and the organization publishing the document. Stated differently, this kind of inconsistency adds a small quantity of "noise" to a communication system. Other instances of inconsistency impair documents more severely by confusing meaning. Let us imagine that a writer abbreviates a technical term, here the compound *triethylaluminum*, in two ways: *TEA* and *Tri-Eth-Al.* Readers may well wonder if the writer is referring to two different terms.

Clearly consistency is an important issue, both for writers, who must try to build consistency into their documents, and for editors, who must deal with the failures of writers to achieve consistency. But despite its importance, despite the frequency with which we hear the precept "Be consistent," the concept of consistency has received no more than passing mention in writing texts and handbooks and in the scholarly literature. It is my aim, therefore, to analyze consistency as a communication concept and to set forth useful guidelines for establishing the most desirable patterns of consistency.

WHAT IS CONSISTENCY?

Consistency, in the context of written communication, can be defined as the orderly treatment of a set of *linked* elements in a document. We may identify certain elements as *linked* when our readers perceive them as making up a coherent group. Clearly, all the figure references in a document as well as all the abbreviations for a particular term are *linked* and are generally perceived as such.

Orderly treatment associated with linking may be either *uniform* or *harmonious.* In the first case each element is treated in the same way; this is called for when the linked elements are of precisely one kind, i.e., when they are not divisible into subsets. In the second case, when the linked elements are divisible into subsets, the linked elements are given several related treatments. All the examples we have seen and indeed all those appearing hereafter in the first two sections of this study are examples of consistency requiring uniform treatment (that is, *uniform consistency*) or the failure to achieve uniform consistency. The third section of this article presents an extended example of consistency requiring harmonious treatment (that is, *harmonious consistency*).

Inconsistency is the disorderly relationship between treatments of a set of linked elements. Generally, it takes the form of more than one treatment, rather than uniform treatment, of an indivisible set of linked elements or else the form of a greater number of treatments than there are subsets in a set of linked elements.

The concept of consistency and such related concepts as linkage and orderly treatment of elements in a document can be defined and discussed in terms of the text itself, the perceptions of the author, or the perceptions of the audience.

I have chosen an audience-based formulation, because it focuses our attention on writing as a vehicle for communication. One implication of this choice, however, is that what is consistent, or inconsistent, ultimately depends on the perception of particular individuals reading a particular document. The treatment of a set of linked elements, though it may appear flawed to the writer or editor, is not inconsistent unless it interferes in some way with the audience's reading of the document or causes the audience to respond negatively to the document. The degree of relativism here, however, is somewhat less than it first appears, since there are cognitive universals that obtain for all readers. In other words, really blatant instances of inconsistency will bother all readers. The examples of inconsistency I have chosen for this study are those that, in my judgment, would indeed be perceived as inconsistent by well-educated, professional audiences, though perhaps not by other audiences.

Categories of Consistency Based on Text Characteristics

The concept of consistency can cover a very broad range of characteristics of a text, and from this perspective the major categories of consistency (and inconsistency) are these:

1. semantic;
2. syntactic;
3. stylistic;
4. spatial; and
5. mechanical.

Semantic – Semantic consistency pertains to linked elements that directly represent meaning and are, therefore, capable of confusing meaning. The use of two abbreviations for one term was a failure to achieve semantic consistency.

A common form of semantic inconsistency is *elegant variation* [1]. Here a writer uses two words (two treatments) to represent one meaning (an indivisible group of linked elements), and the reader may wonder if the writer does not intend two meanings by the two words. Elegant variation differs from most other kinds of inconsistency in that it is an intentional stylistic flourish and not unconscious disorderliness.

Semantic consistency also encompasses the use of special symbols to represent special meanings. For instance, a writer might treat certain terms in a document with asterisks to show that these terms are explained in a glossary.

Syntactic – The best known kind of syntactic consistency is parallel structure. A set of elements which are akin in meaning and which are located next to one another are perceived by readers as linked elements and, therefore, demand uniform treatment in terms of syntax. Syntactic consistency is, however, broader than what is usually meant by parallelism, since it also pertains to a series of elements that demand consistent syntactical treatment even though they are not located next to one another. For instance, the writer of a manual

might establish the expectation for the imperative mood in the first sentence in each of the subsections of a manual. These sentences, then, demand syntactically consistent treatment, although being separated from one another, they probably would not be described as sentences requiring parallel structure.

Stylistic – Whether viewed as a collection of sentences, paragraphs, passages, or other units, an entire document is linked in that it requires a certain style (or, possibly, styles). There is, then, the possibility of inconsistency, based on style, among these linked elements. For instance, a document written in a casual style might contain occasional passages which for no apparent reason are written formally. Readers will note the change and regard these passages as lacking consistency.

Spatial – Elements in a document may be linked in respect to their physical location on a page. Page numbers, for instance, are linked this way: we expect them to appear in the same place from page to page – and if they vary in location, to do so according to a pattern. Recently spatial consistency has received attention from specialists in displaying information on the computer screen. Screen designers are told to locate similar kinds of information in the same place from screen to screen [2].

Mechanical – It is in the area of *mechanics* that most problems of consistency arise. This is because a great many mechanical elements are linked. The subtler choices about capitalization and punctuation, the rationales for using italics and boldface, the decisions about using numerals vs. spelled numbers as well as the different possibilities for representing figure references and abbreviations may all result in consistency or inconsistency.

Unnecessary Consistency

Texts are impaired not only by the failure to achieve various kinds of consistency but by the opposite error: the pointless regularization of linked elements that do not need to be made consistent or, in other words, do not need a reduction in the number of treatments.

A novice editor, for example, once altered an author's use of the name-date citation system so that in every citation just the year appeared in parentheses:

> The procedure was based on the work of Antos (1984), Syslow and Wyld (1983), and Braham (1984).

The editor rewrote every sentence in which the source's last name and the year had been placed in parentheses:

> The procedure was based on earlier research (Antos, 1984; Syslow and Wyld, 1983; Braham, 1984).

The editor's emendations were totally unwarranted: no one familiar with the name-date system would regard an author's use of both forms as an inconsistency

in need of uniform treatment. Rather, it is a legitimate option that authors are expected to decide upon on a case by case basis.

ESTABLISHING HARMONIOUS CONSISTENCY

The following example demonstrates that consistency problems may be much more than matters of housekeeping, and may require complex and challenging communication decisions.

Making Consistent Lists

As a technical writer revises a rough draft, she reaches the place in the document where there are numerous lists. During the composing process, the writer, attending to larger-scale issues, was inconsistent in punctuating these lists. In each list all of the entries belong to one of five different syntactic structures:

1. full sentences;
2. past participial phrases;
3. phrases with (finite) verbs;
4. noun phrases of three or four words; and
5. single nouns.

In some of the lists composed of noun phrases, none of the entries contain punctuation. But in other lists composed of noun phrases, commas follow the entries (with an *and* after the next to last entry and a period after the last entry), as shown below:

> basic unit,
> optional accessories,
> application software,
> customization of software, and
> training time.

In some of the lists composed of complete sentences, all of the entries contain periods, but in other lists, entries are left unpunctuated. In some of the lists composed of past participial phrases and phrases with verbs, all the entries contain periods, but in others they are punctuated with commas, and in still others they are left without punctuation. There is no basis for these different treatments of the list entries, and the number of treatments outnumbers the number of meaningful subsets any writer would be apt to establish among this set of linked elements.

The writer, fortunately, has a good understanding of consistency and proceeds programmatically. She first analyzes the complete set of list entries and divides them into two subsets: *sentence and sentence-like structures* and *nonsentence-like structures.* Past participial phrases, the writer believes, will be perceived and

processed by the reader more or less as past-tense sentences with implied subjects; phrases with (finite) verbs will be perceived and processed more or less as present-tense sentences with implied subjects. Thus, the writer decides that lists composed of these two structures along with lists composed of complete sentences will make up a subset that receives periods as terminal punctuation. The nouns and noun phrases, on the other hand, will not be processed like sentences at all. So the writer decides that this subset will receive no terminal punctuation.

The writer has established a pattern of harmonious consistency. She rejected a pattern of uniform consistency – leaving all entries unpunctuated – because she judged that the reading process would be enhanced if she distinguished between two categories of syntactic structures and punctuated accordingly.

Whether or not we agree with all of these decisions, we can agree that the writer encountered a fairly complex consistency problem and attempted a sophisticated solution. There are, however, numerous circumstances that would have made this consistency problem still more complex. The list entries might have been made up of more than five syntactic structures, and the writer might have divided them into the following three subsets, with each subset given its own kind of treatment:

- sentence and sentence-like structures;
- intermediate structures; and
- nonsentence-like structures.

The consistency problem would become more complex still if some of the individual lists were composed of more than one syntactic structure and if the content of the lists and perhaps time constraints as well precluded extensive re-writing of the entries. The editor would then have had to elaborate upon her pattern by devising principles such as the following:

- nouns and noun phrases can co-exist freely in one list;
- nouns and all other structures cannot; and
- full sentences and past participial phrases can co-exist in one list provided all entries of each structure are grouped together within that list.

Clearly, the pattern necessary to deal with this kind of consistency problem is complex indeed.

GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING OPTIMAL PATTERNS OF CONSISTENCY

Although consistency does present complex problems, a wide variety of patterns of consistency may be established from one set of linked elements. Consequently, we should seek guidelines for creating the optimal pattern of

consistency for each set of linked elements. Technical communicators, I believe, will do well if they establish patterns of consistency that are:

1. logical;
2. evident;
3. functional;
4. resource efficient; and
5. stable.

Be Logical in Establishing Patterns of Consistency

One way in which writers establish *ineffective* patterns of consistency is by devising an illogical basis for a pattern, as in this example:

A rapidly growing corporation, based in California, is compiling a list of 200 cities where it wants to open dealerships during the next five years. In most cases each entry consists of the city and the postal abbreviation of the state. But the writer, in the interest of brevity, has established a pattern of consistency that entails omitting the postal abbreviation for both in-state cities and major metropolitan areas.

When the list is circulated, readers complain that they don't know whether "Richmond" and "Pittsburgh" refer to the two large cities in Virginia and Pennsylvania, respectively, or to the two small cities in California. The writer's pattern of consistency was illogical because two subsets were given one form of treatment (omission of the postal abbreviation), making it unclear which of two subsets "Richmond" and "Pittsburgh" belong to. The writer was consistent; the relationship between treatments and subsets is not disorderly – but it is certainly illogical.

A logical pattern of consistency would have been a single treatment for in-state cities and another for major metropolitan areas, or a single treatment which omitted the postal abbreviation for only those cities for which the identification of state was not necessary.

Be Sure That the Pattern of Consistency Is Sufficiently Evident to the Reader

In some cases a writer may be consistent, but the pattern may not be evident to the reader. As a result, the reader perceives inconsistency, and this perception impairs a document's usefulness in the same way that true inconsistency does.

For instance, a writer once chose to represent most of her figure references in the form *Figure*, but chose to use *fig.* for second and subsequent references to figures that had already appeared. But if this distinction was not evident to the reader, the reader might assume that the writer was disorderly in her treatment of figure references.

Likewise, consider a resume in which the job seeker left extra "white space" around every one of the previous positions that he believed was directly related to the career objective described at the top of his resume. Unless the potential

employer understands the basis of the pattern, the extra space will be perceived as disorderly (an instance of spatial inconsistency).

Find the Most Functional Pattern of Consistency

A pattern of consistency may be logical and evident but simply not functional. Functional, for one thing, means attuned to the reading process. To reverse the standard rules for using numerals and spelled numbers (using one wherever the rule dictated the other) would be consistent, but it would be nonfunctional – and might impair the document more than inconsistent treatment.

Functionality also means useful in terms broader than the reading process. In the resume example, for instance, the decision to use extra space to single out career-related jobs – even if the distinction were fully evident – might not be as functional as grouping the career-related jobs under a separate heading.

Decide Whether the Benefit of Establishing a Pattern of Consistency or Replacing One Pattern with Another Is an Efficient Use of Available Resources. Don't Establish a Pattern You Won't Want to Maintain

The fourth criterion is simply whether using a particular pattern of consistency is worth the time required to devise and execute it. A writer beginning a document (or beginning the first good draft) must decide whether to burden herself with a pattern that will have to be maintained throughout the manuscript. For example, she might debate whether to apply the traditional distinction between *shall* and *will* or whether to follow the more contemporary practice and favor *will* in all cases. The traditional distinction will require more time and effort, but might be worthwhile for a document that is directed toward an older, linguistically conservative audience.

The hyphenation of compound modifiers that precede nouns ("unit modifiers") often poses a severe problem. The decision to hyphenate one set of compound modifiers acts as a precedent for hyphenating similar phrases, and the writer or editor ends up mired in an unending series of time-consuming decisions as he encounters compounds that do not inherently require hyphens but seem to require them on the basis of their similarity to other compounds.

Decisions about resource efficiency are often more complex for the editor than the writer, because the editor must discover what patterns (if any) the manuscript follows and how well they have been executed. If the writer has chosen a fairly effective pattern, and has executed it meticulously, the gain in changing the pattern may not warrant the expenditure of resources involved.

On the other hand, the editor may choose to change the writer's pattern when:

- the writer's pattern is significantly inferior to the pattern the editor wishes to establish;
- the writer's pattern was executed in a disorderly manner and requires extensive editing to begin with;
- the document is one of a series of documents, and the editor's organization wants to maintain consistency (*house style*) from one document to another; or
- the new pattern can be executed simply and quickly (and without the risk of new inconsistencies) by using the global find-and-replace feature on a computerized text editor.

The editor, however, must remember that once he begins to change a pattern of consistency, he is committed to executing that change throughout the manuscript.

Ascertain the Stability of Patterns You Are Considering. If a Possible Pattern is Unstable, Consider Checking Ahead to See if You Will Be Encountering a Manuscript Surprise or Consider a More Stable Pattern of Consistency.

Most of the time a writer or editor devises a pattern of consistency at the first occurrence (or one of the first occurrences) of an element that he believes will be part of a set of linked elements. An editor, for instance, may note early on that the writer did not use the series comma before conjunctions and may decide to do so throughout the manuscript. But the editor will not examine each series in the manuscript before making this decision. Likewise, a writer may decide to use the series comma but will make this decision without knowing every series that will appear in the document. In most cases no problem arises from this early establishing of consistency in the document. In some cases, however, decisions about patterns of consistency must be revised because of circumstances that a writer or editor discovers later on in the manuscript. The writer or editor, in other words, encounters a *manuscript surprise* [3].

For instance, let's consider an editor working on a long list-laden manuscript. Scanning the document, he sees that most of the list entries are single nouns and noun phrases. Only a few are complete sentences. The editor decides, therefore, not to use terminal punctuation with any of the list entries. After all, he reasons, it is not uncommon for complete-sentence list entries to appear without terminal punctuation, and by not using terminal punctuation with the few complete-sentence list elements, there will be uniformity among all of the list entries in the document. After executing this pattern for 150 pages, however, the editor encounters a manuscript surprise in coming to list entries composed of two and even three short sentences. It certainly hinders the reading process to omit the three periods in a sequence of three complete sentences. But it will appear odd and inconsistent for the last sentence of one of these entires not to have a period when the first two sentences do, as shown below:

17. Chamber doors are of double-wall welded construction. They are sound-deadened with an expanded honeycomb core between the walls. Semi-concealed chromium-plated hinges are located on the right or left side, as specified

The editor, therefore, at least if time permits, will likely go back through all the lists and insert periods in all complete sentences.

If the editor had examined every list in the manuscript before establishing the original pattern, he would have noted the multi-sentence list entries and established a pattern that more successfully accounted for them. But, as noted above, very often it is impractical for an editor to scan ahead to examine each element in a set of linked elements, as it is often impractical and often simply impossible for a writer to project ahead to the conditions under which each element of a set of linked elements will appear in a document that does not yet exist.

Because of the possibility of manuscript surprises, writers and editors should try to gauge the stability of the patterns of consistency they are considering; and, if a possible pattern is unstable, should consider checking ahead for manuscript surprises or else consider establishing a more stable pattern. If, for instance, a writer were deciding about the form of figure references to use in her book on diseases of fruit trees, she might well prefer unabbreviated forms in order to prevent potential confusion in certain sentences between "fig.," the figure label, and "fig," the fruit.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONSISTENCY

So far we have assumed that the writer or editor has been free to establish what we may call *internally derived* patterns of consistency. These are patterns established on the basis of the communicator's own assessment of the needs of a particular document, without reference to other documents, style guides, etc.

Both writers and editors, however, are often required to adhere to *externally derived* patterns of consistency. These are patterns based on precepts established prior to and independent of the document that is being written or edited. These precepts most frequently come from style guides, either generally distributed style guides (such as the *Chicago Manual of Style*) or an organization's own style guide.

The primary reason for an organization to insist upon externally derived patterns of consistency is the desire to establish consistency among all (or at least broad classes) of its documents. And there are sound reasons for wanting to maintain consistency among a group of documents. At the same time, however, an externally derived pattern of consistency may not be suitable for a particular document. Every technical communicator has been tempted to reject an externally derived pattern in favor of an internally derived pattern that would be far superior in a particular instance. Organizations should recognize that, at times, much is to be gained from giving professional communicators this freedom.

There is another reason for establishing externally derived patterns of consistency. The development of a style guide is an opportunity to devise comprehensive and carefully worked out precepts for dealing with consistency problems. Thus, an organization's style guide might include a carefully worked out set of precepts for punctuating lists, precepts that would probably result in better patterns of consistency than those individual editors would be apt to devise for themselves under the pressure of the moment. The precepts for reference lists in some of the major style guides are comprehensive and very carefully worked out. They cover all kinds of documents, all kinds of authorship (single, multiple, corporate, etc.), and all the other myriad possibilities among the different categories of publication facts. In general, therefore, they result in very desirable patterns of consistency for reference lists, and all writers and editors need do is follow a set of precepts.

CONCLUSION

Consistency is a significant consideration for all those who write and edit with the aim of producing polished, highly readable prose. Communicators can deal successfully with consistency problems by understanding the nature of consistency and of the various kinds of consistency (and inconsistency) and by establishing patterns of consistency that are:

1. logical;
2. evident;
3. functional;
4. resource efficient; and
5. stable.

Because of its importance, the concept of consistency should be more fully recognized by investigators in the field of technical communication. Indeed, consistency should be recognized as a necessary component of any comprehensive rhetoric of technical and professional writing.

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