Some Elements of Technical Writing

Taken from *The Elements of Technical Writing* by Gary Blake and Robert W. Bly. (New York: Macmillan, 1993)

How to Write Numbers, Units of Measure, Equations and Symbols

Numbers

1. Write out all numbers below 10.
2. When two or more numbers are presented in the same section of writing, write them as numerals.
3. Write large numbers in the form most familiar to your audience and easiest to understand.
4. Place a hyphen between a number and unit of measure when they modify a noun.
5. Use the singular when fractions and decimals of one or less are used as adjectives.
6. Write decimals and fractions as numerals, not words.
7. Treat decimal representations consistently, especially when presenting them in columns, rows, or groups.
8. Do not inflate the degree of accuracy by writing decimals with too many digits.
9. If a number is an approximation, write it out.
10. Spell out one of two numbers—usually the shorter—that appear consecutively in a phrase.
11. Do not begin a sentence with numerals.

Units of Measure

12. Keep all units of measure consistent.
13. Use the correct units for the system of measurement you have chosen.
14. Write basic units of measure in word form, derived units of measure as symbols.
15. Indicate multiplication of units with a raised dot ($\cdot$), division with a slash (/).
16. Write secondary units in parentheses after the primary units.

Equations

17. Use too few rather that too many equations.
18. Center and number equations on a separate line in your document unless they are short and simple.
19. Keep all equal signs, division lines, fraction lines, multiplication signs, plus signs, and minus signs on the same level.
20. Punctuate words used to introduce equations just as you would words forming part of any sentence.

Symbols

21. Use too few rather than too many symbols.
22. Define the symbols you use.
23. Avoid duplication of symbols.
24. Fit symbols grammatically into the structure of your sentence.

A Few Useful Rules of Punctuation, Grammar, Abbreviation, and Capitalization

Punctuation

25. Hyphenate two words compounded to form an adjective modifier.
26. Hyphenate two adjacent nouns if they are both necessary to express a single idea.
27. In a series of three or more terms with a single conjunction, use a comma after each except the last.
28. Omit the period at the end of a parenthetical expression within a sentence; retain it if the entire parenthetical expression stands alone as a sentence.

Grammar

29. Avoid dangling participles.
30. Avoid run-on sentences.
31. Avoid sentence fragments.

Abbreviation

32. Spell out abbreviations at their first appearance, and use too few rather than too many.
33. Omit internal and terminal punctuation in abbreviations.
34. The abbreviation for a specific word or phrase takes the same case (upper case or lower case) as the word or phrase.
35. Avoid using signs in writing (" for inch, ' for foot), except when expressing information in tables.

Capitalization

36. Capitalize trade names.
37. Do not capitalize words to emphasize their importance.
38. Capitalize the full names of government agencies, companies, departments, divisions, and organizations.
39. Capitalize all proper nouns unless usage has made them so familiar that they are no longer associated with the original name.

Principles of Technical Communication

40. Use the active voice.
41. Use plain rather that elegant or complex language.
42. Delete words, sentences, and phrases that do not add to your meaning.
43. Use specific and concrete terms rather than vague generalities.
44. Use terms your reader can picture.
45. Use the past tense to describe your experimental work and results.
46. In most other writing, use the present tense.
47. Make the technical depth of your writing compatible with the background of your reader.
48. Break up your writing into short sections.
49. Keep ideas and sentence structure parallel.
50. Opt for an informal rather than a formal style.