

STE is good English

Mike Unwalla shows that STE is not arcane, difficult to read, or inaccurate.

Bergstrom (2018) writes about the myths of ASD-STE100 Simplified Technical English (STE). He makes many comments with which I agree. Although I agree that STE has some defects, I do not agree that it is arcane, difficult to read, or inaccurate.

STE rules are clear

“STE attempts to enforce good practice with arcane rules” (Bergstrom, 2018).

“The purpose of STE is to give technical writers guidelines on how to write technical texts in a clear, simple, and unambiguous manner that readers throughout the world will find easy to understand” (ASD 2017, p ii).

In the first part of ASD-STE100 (Writing rules), most rules have an explanation of their purpose and examples to show correct and incorrect use. Some rules are:

- Rule 1.3. Use approved words only with their approved meanings.
- Rule 1.10. Do not use slang or jargon words as technical names.
- Rule 3.4. Do not use helping verbs to make complex verb structures.
- Rule 9.3. When you use two words together, do not make phrasal verbs. Possibly, you do not agree with a rule, but most rules are not arcane.

STE is easy to read

“If you disallow most of the words in the English language, ban valid grammatical constructs, and then start replacing these with words and constructs that are not perfect, but ‘will do’, you run the risk of rendering the text difficult to read... or even worse, incomprehensible” (Bergstrom, 2018).

ASD-STE100 texts can be bad English, but a good writer makes sure that the text is good English.

If you agree with the principle of ‘one word, one meaning’ for technical terms, then there is no good reason to ignore the principle for non-technical terms. In STE, the adjective *large* is approved with the meaning of ‘more than average in dimension, quantity, or capacity.’ Why is it necessary to use synonyms such as *big*, *bulky*, or *significant*? How does using synonyms make the text clearer?

STE is accurate

“... you also run the risk of changing the meaning of the text” (Bergstrom, 2018). Possibly, this comment is because Bergstrom also thinks that “you are only allowed to use one word for one meaning” and “you are not allowed to use a word for more than one part of speech.”

You can use some words with more than one part of speech. Examples from ASD-STE100 are as follows:

- *Alternative* (adjective and noun)
- *Correct* (adjective and verb)
- *Control* (noun and verb).

You can use all your technical terms, which can be adjectives, nouns, and verbs. You can use a technical term if the word is unapproved in the STE dictionary. ASD-STE100 rule 1.6 gives examples. The examples that follow are my examples, not ASD-STE100 examples.

Although the adjective *big* is unapproved, a manufacturer of fairground rides will approve the term *big wheel* as a noun that refers to the equipment in which people sit. But, *big wheel* is not approved in all contexts:

- Correct (technical name): The height of the *big wheel* is 30 metres.
- Incorrect (*big* is an adjective, not a technical name): Use the hand tool to remove the *big wheel* from the spindle.

The adjective *conscious* is not in the specification, but rule 1.5.14 (medical terms), lets you use the term:

- Correct: If the person is not *conscious*...
- Incorrect: If you are *conscious* of a problem...

English is an idiomatic language. The vocabulary rules in STE help you to use each word correctly. You *do not* use words that ‘will do’. Thus, there is no reason for the text to be inaccurate.

STE has some defects

Rule 8.6 about word counts is arcane (in the sense of ‘esoteric; known only by a few people [the writers of the specification]’). Most parts of the rule are common sense to me, but I do not understand why quoted text and document titles are counted as one word.


The dictionary rule for the word *thru* tells me to use the word as a preposition with the meaning ‘from a

point in a sequence to another’. (The specification uses American English, but it lets an organisation use other variants of English.) In British English, we use the preposition *to*, but it does not have the same approved meaning as *thru*. The text, “Do steps 4 through 7 again” is not standard British English. Possibly, “Do steps 4 to 7 again” is not correct STE.

STE does not let you add adverbs to your approved technical terms. In a project to write procedures for shipping operations, I used the customer’s technical adverbs such as *onboard*, *onshore*, and *underway*. Thus, the text did not conform to STE. Possibly, I could have thought of ways to change the sentences such that these adverbs were not necessary.

STE does not let you use the pronouns *I*, *he*, and *she*. It does not let you make hypotheses, as I did in the sentence that starts, “Possibly, I could have thought...”.

Although STE is not applicable to all technical texts, it is applicable to more than only “simple procedural text”.

STE is not ‘fixed in stone’. If you think that a writing rule is not correct, or a word is missing from the dictionary, or an unapproved word should not be unapproved, you can send a ‘Change Form’, in which you give your reasons. The Simplified Technical English Maintenance Group (www.asd-ste100.org/membership.html) meets and discusses all the requests for change. Thus, STE continues to improve. 

References

ASD (2017). ASD-STE100 Simplified Technical English: International specification for the preparation of technical documentation in a controlled language, Brussels, ASD.

Bergstrom M (2018) ‘The great STE myth’ *Communicator*, Winter 2018: 50–53.



Mike Unwalla FISTC is a freelance technical communicator. He specialises in ASD-STE100 Simplified Technical English.

E: mike@techscribe.co.uk

W: www.techscribe.co.uk