Corrigo

Benchmarks for Estimating Editing Speed

Speed-reading experts estimate that the average reader can absorb about 250 words per minute. They promote techniques that allegedly boost that rate to nearly 1,000 words per minute. Unfortunately, some folks may expect similar speeds for technical editing. After all, isn't editing like reading? If so, a 20-page white paper should be edited in 20 minutes — or less.

But editing must surely take longer than reading. Maybe it takes, say, five times longer. That would mean editing about 12 pages per hour. Sounds good. Just read the page five times, and out pop the edits.

Actually, that heuristic may hold true for a simple edit, but substantive editing takes more time — 15 to 60 minutes per page, some experts say. So, how long **can** editing take? I suppose it's safe to say that editing shouldn't take longer than writing. (Not counting wordsmiths who write faster than human beings can read.)

In the table below, I present some practitioners' numerical benchmarks for estimating editing time. These speeds were collected from an informal survey of the STC's TE SIG online discussion group and some simple Web searches.

Note that in the table, I've converted everyone's estimates into words per hour (WPH) instead of pages per hour.

Here are my reasons:

- Word counts are universally accepted in this world of diverse printed and on-screen page sizes.
- Word counts may be more persuasive to clients in substantiating longer-than-expected schedule estimates.

Benchmark Editing Speeds (WPH) at Three Levels of Detail

Estimator	Heavy	Medium	Light
Jean Hollis Weber[a]	500–1,000	2,000–3,000	4,000–5,000
Amy Einsohn[b]	250–500	500–750	500–1,000
	1,000–1,750	1,000–1,500	1,500–2,250
Jody Roes[c]	1,000	1,500	3,000
Gary Conroy[c]	500–1,000	2,000	4,000
W. Thomas Wolfe[d]	416	1,250	1,666
Mary Jo David[c]	750–1,250		
Richard Ketron[e]	500–1,000		
Joanna Williams[c]			5,000

Notes:

[a] Original estimates given in terms of 500 words per page.

[b] Original estimates found in *The Copyeditor's Handbook* (see "Resources" on page 3). Top row assumes difficult text; second row assumes standard text.

[c] Original estimates cited in pages per hour (250 words per page assumed).

[d] Original estimates given in pages per day (six hours per day assumed).

[e] Original estimate cited 15 to 30 minutes per page (250 words per page assumed).

STC SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

ONLINE POLL

Do you use the serial comma before the conjunction in a simple series?

- Yes, I use the serial comma. (For example: Jenny has dogs, cats, and gerbils.)
- No, I don't use the serial comma. (For example: Don't hire just any Tom, Dick or Harry.)

Cast your vote and submit your comments on our Web site (www.stcsig.org/te). We'll report the results in our next issue.

CREATING A STYLE GUIDE FOR TECHNICAL DOCUMENTS

As a technical editor, you'd be wise to create a style guide for your writing group. A style guide is a time-saving resource that documents the guidelines for punctuation, capitalization, spelling and usage. Just those four categories may seem overwhelming at first — so much to be covered! But remember that a style guide is a living document; it's constantly updated, never truly finished.

To begin, decide if it makes sense to create your own style guide or adopt an existing one. Some technical editors adopt the *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications* (second edition) as their standard, and then they create a list of exceptions to that guide's rules. The downside here is that people must check two places for answers. If you decide to use this method, keep your list reasonably short. This article assumes you're creating your own guide.

Planning the Style Guide

As you plan the guide, research and answer these questions:

- Who's your audience? Freelance editors? Writers in your group? Others in the company who write about the products?
- Does your audience need examples for the style rules you set? Examples can drive home a style rule for readers.
- How will the style guide be produced? As a help file? On your company's intranet? As printed pages?
- How will you update the guide and get those updates to the guide's users?
- How will people access the information? Index? Search mechanism? (Don't rely solely on a table of contents.)
- Should people read the entire style guide, or should they dip into it only for specific answers? If you choose the latter, consider organizing your guide as an A-Z reference, the traditional organization for an in-house style guide.

- Does your company have people with vested interests in some style decisions? Consider meeting with them about controversial style rules or usage decisions.
- How does the localization of your technical documents constrain your style decisions?

Writing the Style Guide

As you begin writing the guide, document the standard topics that most style guides contain ("Capitalization," "Commas," "Bullet Lists," and so on). Keep your writing style extremely concise, and use subheads to organize the information for readers.

Use your style guide as a place to collect the correct spelling of feature names in your products. Is it "InfoCenter"? Or "infoCenter"? Or "Info Center"? These entries are quick to write and save writers a lot of aggravation.

Early in the development of the style guide, create entries about your group's biggest writing bugaboos. What do you correct over and over as you edit? For example, your writers may document procedures using inconsistent wording. Create an entry called "Standard Wording in Procedures" that defines wording for menus, dialog boxes, and so on. Here's an example from such an entry:

Standard Wording for Menus

Identify the menu at the beginning of the step with the phrase *on the _____ menu;* use the verb *click* for items on a menu.

Right

- On the **Tools** menu, click **Options**.
- On the **View** menu, click **Toolbars -> Standard**.
- On the shortcut menu, click **Select All**.

Wrong

- Click **Options** on the **Tools** menu.
- From the **View** menu, choose **Toolbars -> Standard**.

Don't forget to ask the potential users of your style guide what **they** want in the guide. And provide a mechanism for getting feedback to you about the guide's entries (ones that are there, and ones that may be missing).

Build the style guide during your downtime, and add rules for troublesome terms during your crunch time. Writing a style guide may seem like a daunting task. But remember that each entry you add is a question answered for somebody and, quite possibly, time saved for you.

Ellen Perry

Ellen Perry is a lead technical editor at Autodesk, Inc. She coordinates the editing and indexing of the end-user and developer documentation for AutoCAD, a design and drafting program for architects and engineers.

- Word counts support the editor's focus on words, not pages.
- Word counts of selections or full documents are easily run from modern word processors — that's how I cut this article down from 2,996 words to 1,000!

In the table, the levels of editing — heavy, medium and light — represent a spectrum of editorial interventions, where a heavy edit involves the most rewriting and content-level corrections and a light edit involves only the most superficial proofing of glaring errors. The key is to interpret these intentionally vague categories in terms of your own skills and text. For your reference, the estimators mentioned a variety of technical document types, including online help systems, manuals, white papers, proposals, Web pages, release notes, installation guides, Web-based and paper-based training materials, post-project reviews, marketing copy, requirements, and needs analyses.

With these benchmarks in mind, the best way to estimate editing time is to do the following:

- Calculate a rough time estimate based on a word count and your prescription for a heavy, medium or light edit; use one of the benchmark ranges as a starting point.
- Start editing, keeping track of the number of words you mill per hour or sitting.
- Compare your measurements against the benchmarks.
- Discover through trial and error your **personal word processing speed** — the number of words your brain can mill in an hour.

Your personal word processing speed is the uncertain factor in our formula — complementing the discrete pile of words you are given to edit. That speed is subject to all the functions that make editing slower than speed-reading:

checking for rule violations (spelling, punctuation, grammar), consistency, parallel construction, verb strength, accuracy, logic, persuasiveness, rhythm, tone, appropriateness, flow and many other nuances.

Thinking about personal speed means acknowledging a universal limitation: You can think fast, but you can't think faster. (For this insight, I thank the Oracle character in Tom DeMarco's *The Deadline: A Novel on Project Management.*) Coffee may help, but when you edit, the tyrannical ticking of the clock cannot make your brain process words at a quicker rate. As Mary Jo David of Write Away Enterprises, based in Plymouth, Mich., wrote to me, "No matter what I do, my editing 'average' always seems to be anywhere from three to five pages an hour." I'm the same way — my mill is often set in heavy-editing mode.

The trick to estimating is to identify your brain's preferred rate of word processing — not the optimum, two-espresso brain speed, but something more comfortable and sustainable. Just as you are unique, so must your estimates be unique to your skills and the constraints imposed on you. Once you've determined your personal word processing speed, you'll find it easier to schedule your work when the ideal amount of time your estimate calls for is compressed by an external party's deadline. Shifting out of heavy-editing mode should become easier for you the more you've measured myself in the other modes.

I hope this brief article contributes to your skill at predicting the future. Please e-mail me with your insights at david@wordsupply.com. I'm just beginning to study and write on the topic. At right, to compensate for everything I haven't mentioned, I refer you to some books and online resources. I especially recommend the helpful articles that Robin Cormier and Jean Hollis Weber

have posted online — read these classics for a much more logical approach to the subject — and Michelle Corbin's intriguingly useful Java-based calculator for editorial times.

David W. McClintock

Based in New York, David edits and writes through his firm, Wordsupply.com. By day, he is a senior editor for Dorset House Publishing. He sends heartfelt thanks to all the TE SIG members who e-mailed him their insights.

Resources

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Corbin, Michelle. "JavaScript Editing Project Calculator." http://ebailey.home.mindspring.com/mlcorbin/edit-calc.html

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Weber, Jean Hollis. "How long does editing take?" *Technical Editors' Eyrie: Resources for technical editors.* www.jeanweber.com/about/howlong.htm

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CONNECT WITH YOUR PEERS: JOIN THE TE SIG'S ONLINE DISCUSSION GROUP

The TE SIG's online discussion group officially got started on March 12, 2002, and we hope it will serve as a forum for information exchange, professional support and interaction among the TE SIG members.

Since we sent the invitation e-mail to the TE SIG members, more than 340 interested individuals have subscribed to the list and participated in many interesting discussions, including those on the following topics:

- Charging for heuristic evaluations
- Estimating editing time
- Using editing marks
- Developing an editing portfolio

We hope these quality discussions will continue. Participating in a group like this gives us all a chance to expand our editing knowledge and share information with others in our field. Some ideas for future discussion topics include:

- What are your thoughts on editing Web content, multimedia, digital video, etc., vs. editing paper documents?
- Where should editors come into the process of developing/designing technical documentation?
- How much technical information do editors need to understand to do a thorough content edit?
- What are your opinions of online editing tools?

So, if you've already signed up for the TE SIG's discussion group, continue to ask questions of your fellow editors! Submit issues and concerns, and find out what others have to say. If you haven't signed up yet, go to http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stctesig-L and follow the instructions to become a participating member. Sign-up information, including information on posting messages and modifying your settings, is also available on the TE SIG Web site at www.stcsig.org/te.

If you have any problems with or questions about the discussion group, contact Katie Lerfald at kathryn.lerfald@unisys.com.

Katie Lerfald

Katie Lerfald is a technical editor at Unisys Corporation, where she edits computer hardware and software manuals, and online help files.

RESOURCES

Want more information on editing topics? Look here.

- www.techcomm-online.org
- www.buzzwhack.com
- ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm

If you have a favorite link, let us know. E-mail j9riter@hotmail.com.

In Our Next Issue

- **Tips for finding technical writing and editing jobs**
- **Starting out as a freelancer? We'll share our ideas on getting started.**
- **Your article could appear here. Send it to us now.**

MARCH ONLINE POLL RESULTS

In our March issue, we asked for your style of referring to the computer connection term **online**. Here's how you voted:

- online — 86% (176 votes)
- on line — 1% (2 votes)
- on-line — 10% (19 votes)
- I use another form — 4% (7 votes)

What You Said

- " 'Online' would be used in this form as a modifier (online banking) or location indicator (I found the article online) in a computer context. However, a process or facility would be brought 'on line.' "
- "Online is the preference in Microsoft's style manual for technical publications, which seems to be the most up-to-date reference for computer terms."
- "If your style is to spell 'e-mail' with a hyphen, I think you need to spell 'on-line' with a hyphen also. But the evolution of the spelling of a word usually goes from two words to a hyphen to a single word (to day, to-day, today), so perhaps the word 'on-line' has evolved to the point where it has become one word, but 'e-mail' is not quite so evolved!"
- "I tend to use online as an adjective and on line as a prep. phrase."

For other comments, see the "Corrigo Supplement" section of the TE SIG Web site (www.stcsig.org/te/newsletter/supplement).