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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimator</th>
<th>Heavy</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Light</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jean Hollis Weber</td>
<td>500–1,000</td>
<td>2,000–3,000</td>
<td>4,000–5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy Einsohn</td>
<td>250–500</td>
<td>500–750</td>
<td>1,000–1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,000–1,750</td>
<td>1,000–1,500</td>
<td>1,500–2,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jody Roes</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary Conroy</td>
<td>500–1,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. Thomas Wolfe</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>1,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Jo David</td>
<td>750–1,250</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>1,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Ketron</td>
<td>500–1,000</td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>1,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna Williams</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,250</td>
<td>1,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

- Original estimates given in terms of 500 words per page.
- Original estimates found in The Copyeditor’s Handbook (see “Resources” on page 3). Top row assumes difficult text; second row assumes standard text.
- Original estimates cited in pages per hour (250 words per page assumed).
- Original estimates given in pages per day (six hours per day assumed).
- Original estimate cited 15 to 30 minutes per page (250 words per page assumed).

---

**What’s Inside**

2 Creating a Style Guide for Technical Documents
4 Connect With Your Peers: Join the TE SIG’s Online Discussion Group
4 Resources
4 March Online Poll Results
4 In Our Next Issue

---

**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.
Benchmarks for Estimating Editing Speed  continued from the cover

- 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), consistence, 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.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Title</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
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).