

The Honest Truth

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Keep ASTM Standards Simple

First let me start by saying I love everything about ASTM. It is the greatest of all standards writing organizations, anywhere in the world. No other organization allows for the universal level of input into creating and revising standards as ASTM. Anyone can join, and everyone can participate. No voices are ignored, and anyone who is expert or knowledgeable in the subject matter can put their 2 cents in and change the standard. You don't have to be a member of the "ruling class" to get a membership, you can just sign up and take part.

There however lies one of the major problems with ASTM. Anyone can chime in. What's the problem there you might wonder? It's not the organization that's the problem, it's the people that participate in the process with a goal of showing how smart or clever they are. These people hijack the process and either put in countless negatives with no real merit, or write endless extra non-essential items that add nothing to the clarity of the document.

ASTM is not a place to show off your perceived intelligence. Nor is it a place to make the standard unreadable. In my opinion the chances of following a set of instructions increase exponentially when the steps are simple and easy to follow. Simple language works best. Simple language defeats ambiguities and misunderstandings. Cooking recipes would be the best example of how to write an ASTM Test Method or an ASTM Practice. They contain simple step-by-step instructions, in the active voice, in a logical order. No additional information about the issues of what happens if you don't follow the instructions, no editorial comments about the efficacy of the process, and no hidden marketing messages.

Keep ASTM standards simple, and write them to the level of the intended audience. Most ASTM standards users are not Professors or Philosophers of Science, they are regular intelligent people. Yes, make the document technically correct, but don't add stuff that does not improve the document. Don't waste time on changing sentences if it does not make any tangible improvement. And if you don't use the standard yourself, then you should stay out of the process. Leave it to the people who actually use the standard.

An ASTM Standard should be no more than 5 pages long. Focus on the positive actions, and use simple language. Discussions of what might go wrong, or the dire consequences, or the efficacy of the test should be taken to another forum. If I am trying to follow a process, I do not need to be distracted by sidebar rants on the dangers of errors. Tell me what the procedure is and let me follow it.

And that's the honest truth!

A Benchmark Editorial By: Anna Pinyon