Technical Communication Overview

My version of technical communication is probably unlike anything you have done before. You will have to learn to think in new ways, pay attention to new things, and write in a very different style than you are used to.

Technical communication is the science and art of conveying literal information to a specific audience so that the audience’s needs are met and the information’s purpose is fulfilled. It’s a science because there are rules that assure effectiveness and repeatability. It’s an art because you’re crafting your writing, and you have certain freedoms in your approach. Because you’re writing for consumption by a specified group of people, their needs (and wants) are supremely important. And finally, if what you’re writing doesn’t do its job well, it’s not worth writing.

Creative writing comes from inside you. Technical communication is initiated by some external force that gives you all kinds of constraints on what you can and cannot do; that force usually very specifically defines the product you must produce. (But good technical communicators use a lot of creativity!)

Technical communication (“technical writing”) really is a skill that you will use for work, school, and even for personal purposes. It may be the most useful thing you learn in college.

Technical Communication Characteristics

Primary technical communication characteristics:

- Understandable
- Unambiguous
- Precise
- Accurate (your audience may not recognize errors!)
- Complete
- Rarely read cover-to-cover or sequentially
- Interesting to the intended audience
- Important (to someone!)
- Based on references, usually cited or credited
- Recognized and planned as one-way communication media
- Usable
- Useful

“Creative” vs. Technical Writing

It’s a different world! The hardest part about this class is to think like a technical writer. See the following diagram for a cynical comparative view!
Grading

Grading in this class is largely subjective. There are definite things that we can check for, but a lot of the grading is based on determining what “works” for the given audience and purpose/objective. I wish I could make it as objective a system as, for example, a math class. But I can’t.

Habits I Hope You Develop

This class is as much about good habits and life skills as it is about writing:
1. Always follow a conscious process.
2. Remember you are writing for someone else. It’s their needs that matter.
3. Pay strict attention to detail.
4. If you don’t know, don’t fake it.
5. Strive for perfection.
6. Adhere to deadlines and specifications.
7. Truly understand the “other person”.

Days 1 and 2
“Toast” Learnings:

So far, without even being graded, the “Toast” assignment has provided some important insights:

- Talking with people will often reveal new approaches, facts, problems, and solutions that you can accommodate in your project.
- If you’re not sure about what something means or how to follow certain instructions, asking someone may save you a lot of rework and/or trouble.
- If you are writing a procedure, actually performing that procedure while writing down the steps can save you a lot of guesswork and problem-resolution.
- Once you’ve written a procedure, having someone in the target audience actually perform the steps will provide invaluable feedback and insight.
- The better you know your target audience, the more likely you are to provide them exactly what they need. When all else fails, come right out and ask them what they’d prefer!

PREVIEW: The Technical Communication Process

We will go over this on Tuesday, and we will talk about it throughout the course!

[According to Brian.] Technical communication is a 16-step process. For this course, memorize and religiously apply #1-4 and #14-15! The other steps are helpful hints; we’ll talk about them more throughout the term.

1. Carefully read the instructions, understand them thoroughly, and follow them explicitly!
2. Know the objective of the “product”.
3. Know your audience.
4. Know what your audience needs and wants to be told.
5. Do high-level research on the topic.
6. Reflect on and characterize the content.
7. Decide what you’d like to say and how you want to say it (and the “spin,” if any).
8. Choose the most appropriate medium.
9. Organize the high-level content (with outline, mind map, etc.)
10. Design the look and feel (or use assigned specifications).
11. Test a prototype (“Am I on the right track?”).
12. Do detailed research.
13. Flesh out the outline into a draft.
14. Test for fulfillment of Steps 1, 2, 3, and 4.
15. Refine, proofread, and edit iteratively.
16. Publish.