Persuasive Writing

Some technical writing is objective and unbiased. Some is clearly persuasive – a kind of “sales” document that is intended to convince someone to do something or think in a particular way. Persuasive writing is some of the most important technical communication that you will do. It’s used for:

- Hiring: résumés, cover letters
- School: applications to programs and grad school, requests for financial aid
- Work: proposals (to boss, clients, etc.), asking for a raise, making suggestions (you should include a solution suggestion with every problem report!)

Persuasive writing is difficult. Few students are practiced in the skills needed to change someone’s opinions or alter their actions. If you can do persuasive technical writing well, you will have mastered the “Know your audience” step of the Technical Communication Process.

The Audience will always have some “secret questions” in mind when they know you want something from them:

1. “What’s in it for me if I do?”
2. “What’s in it for me if I refuse?”
3. “What do I have to lose if I do?”
4. “What do I have to lose if I refuse?”

These are “secret” because the reader will rarely ask them out loud. The key to success is telling the reader what they want to hear, or at least what they need to hear!

You don’t need to include answers to all four questions. Instead, use the four questions as tools to look at the same thing in four different ways (remember the shape ball!), and then “blend” the answers into a “smoothie” that best fits the needs of the audience.

Techniques for Persuasive Writing

When writing a persuasive email, letter, or proposal:

- Plan carefully!
- Research!
• In the document, give the readers what they want and need (the secret questions’ answers).
• If there’s a job involved, use the job description as part of your planning – it already says exactly what the reader (future employer) is looking for.

The Author (you!) must always address all of the following things:
• “What I want to do is…” (when/where/how/etc.)
• “What I need to do it is…” (resources: $/people/time/etc.)
• “What I get out of the deal is…” (compensation/reward, often negotiable)
• (Most important) The answers to the audience’s “secret” questions

Getting the last point right is the heart of a good persuasive document. It involves thinking about the audience, understanding their needs and wants, etc.

Structuring Persuasive Writing

In general, the reader will give you about ten seconds or one short paragraph to “hook” them before they discard your message, letter, or résumé!

All persuasive writing has the same basic structure:
1. An attention-getting opener (A-G O) that a) captures the reader’s attention, b) piques their interest, and c) overcomes the “10-second rule” makes them want to keep reading.
2. A body that gives all the details of what the document is about and why the audience should want to approve it (based in the audience’s terms, not the author’s!). Depending on the document, this might include:
   - Problem or situation description
   - A set of possible solutions
   - Analysis (return-on-investment, comparison of preferences, etc.)
   - What the author can offer
   - Recommendations
   - Resource requirements
   - Details about the project (outline, plan, schedule, …)
   - And so on.
3. A call-to-action close (C-T-A C) that a) sums up what’s needed or what you have to offer, b) makes recommendations, and c) very clearly tells the audience exactly what actions you expect (or hope for) in response to having read the document. This C-T-A C should do such a good sales job that it makes it a “no-brainer” to approve the request.

Depending on the type and purpose of the document, it might have other parts, like:
• Return address (cover letter)
• Addressee’s address (cover letter)
• Author’s contact information (résumé)
• Date
• Email or memo heading block
• Executive summary (some proposals)
• Abstract (some proposals)
• Appendices (some proposals)
• Appendices with tons of data
• References and citations
Salutations

Proper salutations are important to setting the tone of your message/letter. Always use the formal form. Whenever possible, address the recipient by name – the research is worth it, because the effect is much more powerful. (If you must use a generic salutation, address a specific person, not a department. Right: “Dear Albany Sears Automotive Service Manager:”; wrong: “Dear Sears:”.)

Peer Review

Proofreading, review, usability testing, and other quality control techniques are critical to the technical writer.

Always ask someone else to look over your work before you turn it in. Be sure to give them the assignment sheet with checklist as well as the document itself! If they don’t know the requirements, they cannot tell if you have met them!

The Technical Communication Process (again!)

The Quiz clearly showed people had not paid enough attention to the Technical Communication Process. Memorize #1-4 and #14-15, by number, in order!

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.

Cover Letters

Your cover letter creates a bridge between your very general résumé and the specifics of the job situation you are applying for. It is probably the most important technical document you will
write. A bad cover letter often will immediately eliminate you from consideration no matter how well you are qualified for the job.

(Cover letters also are used to introduce documents to the reader you send them to; for example, a proposal is almost always accompanied by a cover letter. Obviously the specifics of this type of cover letter are different than those of cover letters for résumés.)

The Résumé Cover Letter Process

1. Do the groundwork on the company. If the company gives its name, research it on the Web. Find out their reputation, how they treat employees, and their policies; get lots of background on them the more you know, better you can answer questions and the more you’ll impress them. Besides, you may discover you don’t want to work for them.

   If the company’s name isn’t given, try to find it out. Recruiters and temp services will rarely tell you, but sometimes cross-referencing an email address or phone number or Internet domain registration will reveal gold.

2. Research the job itself. Read the job description carefully. See if you can find out more on the web, perhaps from current or past employees (find some, tell them you’re interested working for their employer, and invite them to coffee). Look at competitors’ similar jobs. Characterize what you’d be doing at work, and what that would require. Ask yourself if you can do the duties; don’t bother applying for “experienced” positions unless you can do the work, or unless you are very convincing in an interview!

3. Try to identify the hiring manager, so that you can address them by name and title. Also try to find out something about her/him that will help you to write a better letter. Remember, you may have to write a letter that works both for Human Resources (legal to work, meet basic qualifications, etc.) and the actual supervisor of the position (able to do the job, fast learner, good potential, etc.).

4. Map yourself to the job. Read the job duties and specification (if there is one) carefully again. Underline/highlight things the employer requires, and things they prefer. Mark things that correspond with your skills, experience, or education. Mark things you do not currently have, and figure out how you’d learn them or work around them. Look for regulatory requirements like certifications, licenses, food handler’s card, etc.

5. Mine gold. Go back through the job posting/description with a highlighter looking for what they want you to tell them (their “Shopping List”):
   • Superlatives: Anything with adjectives or adverbs (“highly experienced logger,” “strict attention to processes,” etc.) is especially important to the employer.
   • Significant action verbs: Special actions that indicate you must do more than the basics of existence (“initiates,” “creates,” “manages,” etc.).
   • Outright gifts to you: Not-so-obvious places where they tell you exactly what they are looking for (“dependability,” “cheerful attitude,” “immediate availability,” etc.).

6. Plan what you are going to write. Determine what you should say in each of the three parts of your cover letter. (Using the Cover Letter Worksheet will help you.)