

MEMORANDUM

Note: This example does not formally cite its sources (but it should).

To: L. Lennie Irvin
From: Joe Twain
Date: September 23, 2____
Subject: Findings Concerning the Inquiry of "What is Technical Communication?"

INTRODUCTION

Technical communication is an important field that we're all affected by, even if we are not aware of it. Whenever information is too complex or too numerous to be easily understood, it is the duty of a technical communicator to take in that information, understand it, and then republish that information in an easy to understand form.

For a project in this Technical Writing course, we were tasked with finding out what exactly technical communication entails. This exploratory process consisted of defining the field by finding out the duties, responsibilities, and skills common to all technical communicators.

Multiple sources were consulted during the course of this inquiry. We started out with our textbook and then went on to the site of the Society for Technical Communication to read how the profession as a whole describes itself. Furthermore, we looked at accounts by individual professionals and even interviewed one; in my case, I spoke to Joe Smith of Longacre Group LLC. Additionally, we looked at job postings for technical communicators to see what skills are in demand and what responsibilities a technical communicator is expected to handle in reality.

This report consists of three parts: definitions of technical communication; the duties, responsibilities, and skills required of a technical communicator; and an analysis of how Mr. Smith is a technical communicator because he meets the definitions mentioned in previous sections.

Overall, the field of technical communication can be described as taking complex information and then simplifying it so that it easily accessible and understandable by the target audience.

COLLECTED DATA

What is Technical Writing?

I consulted four sources to find out the definition of technical writing.

The textbook definition: "Whenever you convey usable information to various people in various situations, you work as a technical communicator." In this case, usable information refers to information that "enables us to perform complex tasks, solve problems, make decisions, and create ideas."

The Society for Technical Communication(STC) definition: "Technical communicators have the crucial job to plan, design, organize, write, edit, and test information." Furthermore, the goal of the STC is to encourage "the development of professionals whose jobs are to make complicated information usable by many."

Ben Day, of the iRobot Corporation, describes his job: "I, as the technical writer, take the complex information provided by some of the world's brightest roboticists and simplify it so that the user, who may be operating under the most hazardous conditions, can easily understand and use the robot's functions and capabilities."

John Humpert, a senior member of the STC, similarly describes himself: "After I interview and gather information, I match the message to the audience, fit the materials to adult learning patterns, and make it all flow intuitively for your customer. Your R&D talent can keep its focus on the company's next big winner."

In these four definitions, even though the wording is a little bit different, the underlying message is the same: a technical communicator is someone who can understand the audience's information needs and then meet them by providing information that is easy to understand. Additionally, it is hinted that the best technical communicators are those who, while working on the project, aren't directly involved with developing or engineering it.

What are the duties, responsibilities, and skills of a technical communicator?

Again, I consulted a multitude of sources to find out the functions of a technical communicator. The STC website proved to be useful by providing a very general outline of what is required, but I felt that also looking at job postings is the best way to capture a snapshot of the modern communicator. The rationale behind this is that technical communication is a field that evolves to best make use of contemporary technology.

A summary of the general skills required, from the STC page, is as follows:

- Writing skills - a technical writer should be proficient in writing.
- Technical skills - a technical writer should be able to understand what he is writing about.
- Tool skills - a technical writer should be able to use modern software to communicate efficiently.
- Interview skills - a technical writer should know how to ask for more information.
- Design skills - a technical writer should be able to create appealing layouts.
- Testing skills - a technical writer should check that the documentation matches the product.

At the beginning of the semester, we looked at job postings for technical communicators listed on STC chapter websites. Here is a list of required general skills, duties, and responsibilities that were common to multiple postings:

- The ability to create documentation for software or a process without any existing documentation.
- The ability to be flexible and work with little oversight or on a team.
- The ability to communicate with coworkers like being able to take criticism or interview subject experts during the course of creating documentation.
- The ability to meet tight deadlines.
- Proficiency with Microsoft Office, HTML, XML, and page-layout software such as PageMaker or InDesign.

While reading through stories written by technical communicators about their jobs on the STC website, I noticed a common theme amongst the stories: many of the communicators feel that they play an important role in their organization and carry a large responsibility.

Ben Day's story, for example, speaks of how he is responsible for writing documentation on how to operate bomb disposal robots. The success of a bomb disposal operation hinges, in part, on how well he described how to operate the robot. Even if an operation failed, the fact that it was a robot that blew up and not a human, shows how much responsibility a technical writer has in that position.

Case Study: Joe Smith, Technical Communicator

Lastly, in my search to find out more about technical communication, I made contact with a professionally employed technical communicator, Joe Smith, a programmer for The Longacre Group LLC.

Mr. Smith's primary task as a programmer is to code extensions for Drupal, an open source content management platform. The requests for features to be added into Drupal come from clients, which are usually higher education institutions, and it is Mr. Smith's task to understand his client's requests and to solidify them into actual code.

Here is a list of Mr. Smith's job tasks:

- Interview clients to find out what they require.
- Write the required code for clients.
- Periodically communicate the progress of the coding to his clients via email or screensharing.
- Explain how the final code works to his clients.
- File bug reports for problematic code that explain what the current behavior is and what the

- correct behavior should be.
- Write corrected code in response to bug reports and then provide explanations of what was fixed and how.
- Write code that has not yet been requested by a client and then create documentation for the code.

In analyzing the tasks that Mr. Smith must perform, it is clear that he has a high degree of skill in technical communication. There is not a single task that he performs that does not require some combination of writing code, writing documentation, or contacting his clients and understanding their needs.

SUMMARY

After considering all of the collected data, it is obvious that technical communicators are the indispensable bridge between engineers and the user. They have the hard task of understanding a process, breaking it down, trimming away all of the unnecessary information without losing detail, and then presenting it to the user.

The best technical communicators are those who are flexible enough to work without much oversight either by themselves or, as needed, with team members. Technical communicators also require a wide array of skills to be successful: writing skills, comprehension skills, interpersonal communication skills, software skills, design/layout skills, and testing skills.

Often times, technical communicators carry heavy responsibilities. The documents that they produce have to be exact and detailed so that the processes they describe cause no harm to the users. And finally, one can be a technical communicator while also having other job responsibilities. A programmer, in addition to programming, also has to act as a technical communicator in explaining what he is working on in a way that his clients or overseers can understand.

Note: This version of the assignment contained only two questions. Subsequent versions have changed the assignment to cover three questions.