Technical Communication

Overview

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What Is Technical Communication

✓ My 2010 Toyota Camry is for sale. It's clean! It's reliable! It's good as new!

✓ My clean, reliable, good-as-new 2010 Toyota Camry is for sale.

✓ Given-new contract, schema theory

Definitions (1)

✓ "In technical writing a person reports factual information objectively for the practical use of his or her readers, often for a specific reader. The purpose of technical writing is always to inform. Often it provides facts that help the reader answer a question, solve a problem, make a decision, or the like. Such writing does not seek to entertain or appeal to emotions, but to inform objectively. The quality of any piece of technical writing depends on how objectively and clearly it presents the information that readers will need."

✓ —John Lannon, Technical Writing, 1st edition, 1979

Definitions (2)

"As a technical writer, you communicate and interpret specialized information for your readers' use. Readers may need your information to perform a task, answer a question, solve a problem, or make a decision. Whether you write a memo, letter, report, or manual, the document must advance the goals of your readers and of the company or organization you represent.

Unlike poetry or fiction, which appeal mainly to our imagination, technical documents appeal to our understanding. Technical writing therefore rarely seeks to entertain, create suspense, or invite differing interpretations…

—John Lannon, Technical Writing, 7th edition, 1997

Definitions (3)

"...to translate this [raw] data into usable information, we have to sift through it all and figure out what it means and how it applies. Then—so that others can use it—we shape this material as some type of document (memo, letter, report, manual, online help, email, Web page, or script for an oral presentation). And this is where technical communication comes in: making information usable for various people in various situations (Gurak and Lannon 4).

Whenever you prepare a document to serve the needs of its users, you work as a 'technical communicator.'"

—John Lannon, Technical Writing, 9th edition, ?

History: 1900s to 1950s

✔ Early 20th Century
  – technical writing classes began to be taught
✔ 1940s
  – big growth
  – readability formulas
  – English professors began to be consulted
✔ 1950s
  – first programs in professional writing

1950s to 1960s

✓ 1952

– RPI summer program

– Carnegie-Melon: weekend program

✓ 1955

– RPI began the first graduate program in TW

✓ 1966

– first PhD program in RPI (PhD programs established in many universities in late 80s and early 90s)

1970s: Focus on Text

✓ Style, rules + recipes, modeling of generic forms

✓ Positivism: writer translating reality to the reader

✓ Research: personal experience, anecdotes, surveys

✓ Plain English movements

✓ Readability formulas

Late 1970s and Early 1980s: Focus on the Writer

✔Invention

✔Cognitive psychology principles

✔Document design guidelines

✔Research: surveys, the first qualitative studies

Mid to Late 1980s: Focus on the Reader

✔ Audience

✔ Reader-response theory

✔ Research
  - 2nd wave of qualitative studies
  - writer + reader interactions
  - usability studies

Mid 80s to Early 90s: Focus on Context

✓ Rhetorical situation

✓ Social construction theory

✓ Social accommodation + innovation

Late 80s to 2000s: Expansion

- ✔ Socio-cognitive approach
- ✔ Postmodern approaches
- ✔ Oral + written texts
- ✔ Visual + written
- ✔ Computers + everything

2000s to 2010s: Content Management

✓ Datatizing

✓ (Dis)Placing the Rhetorical Context

✓ Reinventing the Role of Writers and Editors

✓ Separation of Form from Content

✓ From Tools to Implementation

What TC Entails: Theory

✔ Rhetorical theories

✔ Composition theories

✔ Information design

✔ Computers and writing

✔ Visual literacy

✔ Cross-cultural communication

✔ …

What TC Entails: Practice

✓ Business writing/technical writing

✓ Document design

✓ Visual design

✓ Desktop publishing

✓ Computers and writing

✓ Digital rhetoric

✓ Web design

✓ Usability testing

✓ Subject matter knowledge

✓ Knowledge of conventions

A Sample Rhetoric & Composition Curriculum

- ✓ Introduction to Rhetoric and Advanced Composition
- ✓ History, Theory, and Practice of Argumentative Writing
- ✓ History, Theory, and Practice of Expository Writing
- ✓ Twentieth-Century Composition Theory and Practice
- ✓ Practical Grammar

- ✓ Technical Writing
- ✓ Business Writing
- ✓ Document Design
- ✓ Visual Rhetoric
- ✓ Electronic Writing and Publishing
- ✓ Editing
- ✓ Advanced Grammar
- ✓ Grant and Proposal Writing
- ✓ Gender and Writing
- ✓ Senior Seminar

A Sample Technical Communication Curriculum

- ✓ Introduction to Technical Communication
- ✓ Issues in Composition
- ✓ Rhetorical Criticism
- ✓ Report Writing
- ✓ Style
- ✓ Usability Testing
- ✓ Web Design
- ✓ Information Design
- ✓ Studies in Composition (Advanced Composition)

- ✓ Special Topics - Applied Visual Rhetoric
- ✓ Technical and Professional Editing
- ✓ Developing Instructional Materials
- ✓ Advanced Web Design
- ✓ Interaction Design
- ✓ Internship in Technical Communication
- ✓ Professional Issues in

Relevant Associations

✔ Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW)

✔ Society of Technical Communication (STC)

✔ Council on Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC)

✔ Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)

✔ Computers and Writing (C&W)

✔ Rhetoric Society of America (RSA)

✔ Writing Program Administration (WPA)

✔ Association for Business Communication (ABC)

Relevant Journals

✔ *Technical Communication Quarterly*

✔ *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*

✔ *Technical Communication*

✔ *College Composition and Communication*

✔ *Computers and Writing*

✔ *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*

✔ *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*

✔ *Business Communication Quarterly*