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ENGL 234: Technical Writing

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Chapter one: Thinking about audience, purpose, and genre

What is technical writing? It refers to published work containing information on how non-sepcialists in a field would accomplish a task.

* Computer Manuals
* Assembly instructions
* Research Articles
* Articles explaining a process
* Training films
* Instructions on doing online registration
* Wikis or User groups which update technical information continuously

These all constitute a technical manual, which is supposed to teach someone about a process.

All writing takes place in a context and involves an Encoder, a message and a decoder (Think of it as a triangle connecting three points around the message). Technical communication requires specialized knowledge and provides a bridge between specialists and lay-people.

They can also incorporate visual elements to help readers accomplish some task.

The three points in the triangle are the EnCODEr, Decoder, and reality. Within the triangle is the message or signal. In this case the signal is a distillation of reality prepared by the writer for the reader.

Writing focused on the writer is “Expressive”

Writing focused on the Reader is “Persuasive”

Writing focused on the text is “Literary”.

Lastly, the writing focused on reality is technical.

However, this model is flaw since there is no context, the situation that we are to understand the text within. IN this sense we can surround our triangle with a rectangle that represents context.

Context is important since it helps us understand how to write our book and how it could be understood.

This theory (The communication Triangle) is flawed in that it enforces the idea that only one method of focus can be adopted. That a newspaper article can only describe reality and not persuade the reader.

However, Walter Beale’s model is far more flexible. It lists four methods of communication on a circle.

* Rhetorical (Deliberative rhetoric)
* Scientific (Informative)
* Instrumental (Performative)
* Poetic (Reflective/exploratory)

This model includes arrows that point from all ends to each other end. Indicating that each method can work on a sort of scale ranging from any given method to another. Meaning a piece of literature could aim to be both poetic and scientific.

While Technical writing sounds boring and in many cases it can be, good technical writing can be just as wonderful as creative writing. The task of the technical writer is to create a technical manual that can help the reader develop their skill with our software or product.

As technical writers we should think of our “audience” as “Users” since our relationship with the reader is one of much more interaction. Than a typical audience might offer.

Since in many cases the purposes of a technical document is to teach a user and help them through a process, so it helps to include sections which are easy to skim through.

When you write technically to a general audience, it is poor practice since you are assuming that all users have the same level of knowledge and experience.

It is important to include the most basic resources to uninitiated users. It is also paramount to try and understand what the users know.

When it comes to the audience, there are several types.

*Primary Audience* – the group of users you expect to be reading your manual.

*Secondary Audience* – The group of users who will shortly skim your manual to refresh their memory. (Tend to have more knowledge than the primary Audience)

*Initial Audience –* the individual who will approve the manual, affecting whether or not it will be published.

*Gatekeeper Audience* ***–*** This is another individual who will affect the possibility of the manual reaching the audience, typically a supervisor or manager who will provide final approval. May also provide feedback that results in revisions.

*Watchdog audience* – this audience may be government officials who may not be able to affect the publishing of your document, but who may affect the reputation of your employer.

You should be focused on the Primary Users.

In order to learn about your user, you should:

* Take an inventory of what you know about your target group
* Create a profile based on the traits that make your target user different from the other users
* Interview individuals who fit into the profile
* Observe individuals of your profile interact with a document
* Analyze earlier versions of the document to assess how the user was characterized there to note changes, useful strategies and mismatches with your profile.

There are differences in how useful these methods are, interviews being the most effective. It is important to keep your view up to date with your users.

Building an inventory about your users requires.

* Determining experience with subject
* Educational background
* Experience with and attitude toward learning new things
* Experience with technology
* Relevant demographics

Genre is the style of writing, typefaces, font size, etc.

Genre is also the structure of the writing, imagine a cookbook.

Genre also includes the rhetorical conventions, what is expected of the writing to accomplish. (Entertain, Inform, Persuade, ETC.)

The reason why it is important to know genre is so that you can focus on your text and not how to format it.

In order to analyze a new genere is to look at it’s

1. Style
2. Structure
3. Register

The style is the sentence length, kind, and complexity, word choice, use of figurative language and metaphors.

Structure refers to how the information is organized, this includes subdivision, length, what type of content appears in each section.

Register is the level of language used in the genre, is it casual, informal, or formal, are contractions Used? Is “I” used?

When you analyze style, you must

* Check Sentence length in words
* Calculate average sentence length
* Identify each sentence, is it simple, compound, complex or compound-complex?
* Count the total number of each type of sentence in the document or genre
* Counte the number of words per paragraph
* Count the number of sentences in each paragraph

When analyzing the structure, you must

* Assess the use of topic sentences in this genre
* Locate transitional phrases or elements that are used to move from one topic to the next
* Count the number of transitional phrases or elements used in the document
* Examine the patterns of organization used in the paragraphs
* Count the different methods that you identify
* Examine concluding sentences and paragraphs.

When analyzing register

* Count the number of jargon or technical words
* Count the number of conversational or normal words
* Counte the number of academic words
* Calculate percentages
* View how the technical language is used
* Count the number of contractions
* Calculate the percentage of contractions against the total number of words

Genre sets are groups of documents that go together. Like a Cover Letter and Resume.