Technical Communication in the Workplace

Introduction to Technical and Business Writing

In this course, you'll learn the differences between academic and workplace communication, with a focus on effective communication in professional settings. Understanding these differences is crucial for writing that meets the needs of your audience and achieves the desired outcomes.

Workplace Communication

Workplace communication refers to all the ways we talk or write at work, whether in a business, industry, or other professional settings. It's sometimes called **professional writing, business writing,** or **occupational writing**—basically, the type of writing you do in your career.

Rhetorical Situation

- **What is it?**: Think of it as understanding the situation you're in when you communicate. Lloyd Bitzer came up with this idea that says good communication depends on the context—who you're talking to, what they expect, and the best way to get your message across.
- **How does it work?**: Imagine you're writing an email to your boss versus a text to a friend. The way you communicate changes depending on who you're talking to and what the situation is. For your boss, you'd be more formal and direct, while with a friend, you might be casual and chatty.

Why is Effective Communication Important?

Good communication at work is super important for several reasons:

- **Performance Evaluations**: How you write or speak can influence how your work is judged. For example, if you submit a report with clear and concise writing, it shows that you understand your job well.
- **Professional Reputation**: The way you communicate can build or break your reputation at work. If you're known for clear and effective emails, people will see you as reliable and professional.
- **Organizational Success**: Your ability to communicate well can help your company do better in the market. For example, if you can explain a new idea clearly in a meeting, your team is more likely to support and execute it effectively.

Features of Academic Writing vs. Workplace Writing

Academic Writing

- **Purpose**: The main goal is to show your knowledge on a subject. For example, writing an essay to prove you understand a topic for a grade.
- **Writer's knowledge of topic:** Less than the teacher who evaluates the writing.

- **Audience**: Usually, your audience is more knowledgeable, like teachers or professors. They expect in-depth analysis and well-supported arguments.
- **Criteria**: The focus is on depth, logic, clarity, and proper grammar. For instance, in a research paper, you need to provide detailed explanations and cite sources accurately.
- **Graphic Elements**: These are sometimes used to explain concepts, like charts in a science report.

Workplace Writing

- **Purpose**: Here, the goal is to get things done or influence decisions. For example, writing an email to convince your boss to approve a project.
- **Writer's knowledge of topic:** Usually more than the reader's knowledge.
- **Audience**: Your audience could be anyone in the organization, often with less technical knowledge. They need practical information they can act on.
- **Criteria**: The writing should be clear and to the point. Busy readers appreciate directness.
- **Graphic Elements**: These are used a lot to help people understand and find information quickly, like using charts in a business report to summarize data.

Technical Writing

- **Purpose**: Helps people make decisions and perform tasks.
- **Context**: Responds to workplace needs, where the writer conveys important information both verbally and visually.
- **Audience**: Often has specific questions or tasks.
- **Organization**: Techniques such as headings and visual cues are emphasized to help readers quickly find the information they need.

Examples of Technical Writing:

Correspondence
Memos to your boss and to your Routine letters to customers, vendors etc Letters to customers Sales letters to potential customers Electronic mail to co-workers or customers
Short Reports
Analysis of problem Recommendation Equipment Evaluation Progress or periodic report Description of results of a laboratory work or a company trip
Long Reports
Project report in field or laboratory work Proposal and Feasibility study
Other Examples
Abstract or summary of technical articles Technical article or presentation Operation manual Website

Features of Technical Writing

- **Purposeful**: Technical writing is all about achieving specific results. Whether you're writing a user manual or a project report, the goal is clear and focused.

  Example: If you’re writing instructions on how to assemble a piece of furniture, your purpose is to guide the reader step-by-step so they can successfully put it together.

- **Contextualized**: This means that the writing is tailored to fit the specific situation or audience. You consider who will be reading and what they need to know.

  Example: If you’re writing safety guidelines for engineers, you might use technical terms that they’re familiar with. But if you’re writing for general staff, you’d use simpler language to make sure everyone understands.

- **Realistic**: Technical writing is based on real, factual information. There’s no room for guessing or opinions.

  Example: A report on the results of a scientific experiment would include actual data, observations, and findings, not assumptions or personal thoughts.

- **Directional**: The writing is aimed at a specific audience, guiding them towards understanding or action.

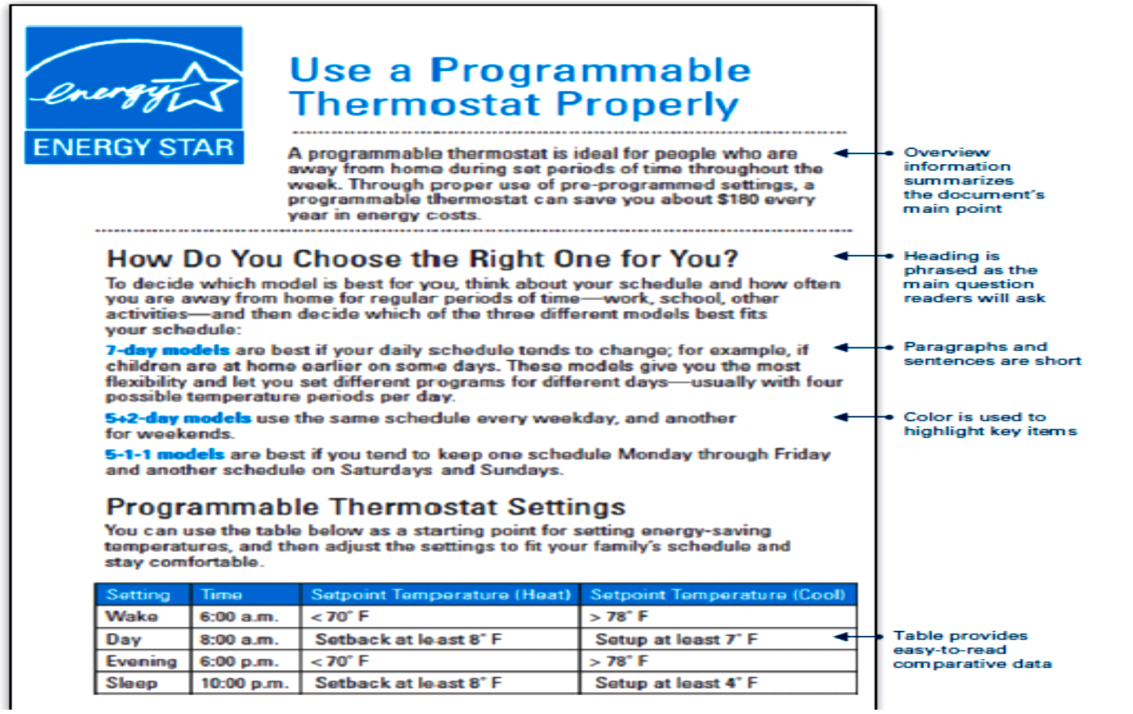
  Example: A troubleshooting guide for software is directed at users who are experiencing specific problems. It’s written to help them find and fix those issues.

- **Outcome-Based**: The writing is meant to achieve a specific goal, like solving a problem, teaching a new skill, or completing a task.

Example: An instruction manual's goal is to ensure that the user can successfully operate the device by following the steps provided.

- **Interdisciplinary**: Technical writing might involve different fields of expertise, bringing together knowledge from various areas to solve a problem.

  Example: A report on a new medical device might involve input from engineers, doctors, and regulatory experts, combining their knowledge to create a comprehensive document.



Setting	Time	Setpoint Temperature (Heat)	Setpoint Temperature (Cool)
Wake	6:00 a.m.	< 70° F	> 78° F
Day	8:00 a.m.	Setback at least 8° F	Setup at least 7° F
Evening	6:00 p.m.	< 70° F	> 78° F
Sleep	10:00 p.m.	Setback at least 8° F	Setup at least 4° F

Considerations in Technical Writing

1. **Audience**: Understand their technical knowledge, interests, and needs.
2. **Purpose**: Identify whether you are informing, persuading, or solving a problem i.e. to inform, to persuade, to educate.
3. **Complexity**: Break down complex information into simpler, understandable ideas.
4. **Format**: Choose the appropriate medium—written documents, presentations, videos, or discussions.
5. **Clarity**: Ensure your message is concise, easy to understand, and free of errors.
6. **Feedback**: Encourage questions and interactive sessions to clarify understanding.
7. **Timeliness**: Communicate without unnecessary delays.
8. **Visuals**: Use diagrams, flowcharts, and screenshots to illustrate complex concepts.
9. **Accessibility**: Make sure your communication is understandable to all intended readers.
10. **Consistency**: Maintain a consistent style and format for clarity and professionalism.

Purpose of Technical Writing

- **Information**: Helping others learn about a subject or make a decision.
- **Persuasion**: Reinforcing or changing attitudes and motivating readers to take action.

Audience of Technical Writing

- **Supervisors and Superiors**: Those who evaluate your work.
- **Colleagues**: Peers within your department.
- **Subordinates**: Team members you manage.
- **Other Departments**: Employees across different branches.
- **Clients**: External stakeholders or customers.
- **Vendors and Subcontractors**: Partners involved in your projects.
- **Academic Readers**: Professors or selection committees in professional contexts.
- **HR Managers**: In charge of recruitment and selection processes.

Tone in Technical Writing

- **Factual**: The tone is usually serious and focused on providing accurate information. It may change slightly depending on who you're writing for, but it remains professional.

  Example: If you're writing a technical report on a new software update, you would clearly state the facts about the new features, without adding personal opinions or casual language.

- **Neutral**: The tone should match the audience's expectations. It's important to be neither too formal nor too casual—just appropriate for who's reading.

  Example: When explaining a technical process to a group of engineers, your tone would be straightforward and focused on the details they need to know.

- **Sincere**: Avoid using overly emotional language. Keeping a calm and professional tone helps maintain trust and clarity.

  Example: In a troubleshooting guide, you would stick to clear, calm instructions without expressing frustration or excitement, even if the issue is complex.

- **Polite**: When communicating, especially with someone who is in a higher position, being polite is crucial. This helps in maintaining respect and professionalism.

  Example: If you're sending an email to your boss about a project delay, you would explain the situation politely and offer solutions, rather than just stating the problem.

- **Reader-Centered**: Focus on what the reader needs and how they can benefit. Use positive language that makes the reader feel valued and supported, often by addressing them directly. Emphasize the reader's viewpoint – the **"you" approach**.

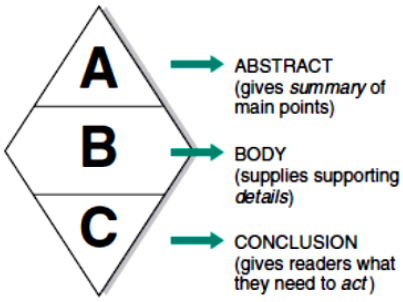
Writer-centered Perspective	Reader-centered Perspective
If **I** can answer any questions, I'll be happy to do so. **We** shipped the order this morning **I'm** happy to report that . . .	If **you** have any questions, please ask. **Your** order was shipped this morning. **You'**ll be glad to know that . . .

Negative Wording	Positive Wording
• We cannot process your claim because the necessary forms have not been completed. • We do not take phone calls after 3:00 PM on Fridays. • We closed your case because we never received the information requested in our letter of April 2.	• Your claim can be processed as soon as you complete the necessary forms. • You may reach us by telephone on Fridays until 3 PM. • Your case will be reactivated as soon as you provide the information requested in out April 2 letter.

Structure of Technical Writing

ABC Format

- **Abstract:** A brief beginning component is represented by the narrow top of the diamond, which leads into the body.
- **Body:** The longer middle component is represented by the broad, expansive portion of the diamond figure.
- **Conclusion:** A brief ending component is represented by the narrow bottom of the diamond, which leads away from the body.



Task 1: Analysis of a Technical Communication Document

Locate an example of technical communication, such as users guide, manual, or a document borrowed from a family member or an acquaintance who works, and prepare a brief analysis in which you

explain:

1. The purpose for which the piece was written

2. The apparent readers and their needs

3. The way in which the examples differ from typical academic writing

4. The relative success with which the piece conveys the message (organization, special features of technical writing)

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1. Purpose for Which the Piece Was Written

The **User Guide for a Smartphone** was written to help users understand how to operate their new device. It provides step-by-step instructions on setting up the phone, using its features, troubleshooting common issues, and maintaining the device.

2. Apparent Readers and Their Needs

The intended readers are smartphone users who have just purchased the device. These users could vary widely in technical knowledge, ranging from beginners to more advanced users. Their needs include:

- Understanding basic operations (e.g., turning the phone on/off, making calls, sending messages).
- Learning about advanced features (e.g., using the camera, setting up email).
- Troubleshooting problems (e.g., what to do if the phone freezes or won't charge).

The guide must cater to a diverse audience, providing clear instructions that are easy to follow, regardless of the reader's technical background.

3. Differences from Typical Academic Writing

Here's how the **User Guide** differs from academic writing:

- **Purpose**: While academic writing often aims to demonstrate understanding and contribute to scholarly discussions, this technical document is focused on practical use. It's meant to instruct, not to analyze or argue.
- **Audience**: Academic writing is usually intended for an audience that is already knowledgeable about the subject, like professors or peers. In contrast, the user guide is designed for a general audience, possibly with little to no prior knowledge of the device.
- **Tone**: The user guide uses a straightforward, instructional tone, avoiding jargon that might confuse the reader. Academic writing tends to be more formal and may include complex language and concepts.
- **Organization**: The user guide is organized into sections that allow readers to quickly find the information they need, such as setup instructions or troubleshooting tips. Academic writing, on the

other hand, is often organized into a structured format that includes an introduction, literature review, methodology, and conclusions.

- **Visuals**: The user guide includes many visual elements like diagrams, icons, and screenshots to aid understanding. Academic papers may include charts or graphs but are generally more text-heavy.

4. Success in Conveying the Message

The **User Guide for a Smartphone** is relatively successful in conveying its message due to the following:

- **Organization**: The guide is well-organized with a table of contents, sections, and subsections that make it easy for users to navigate through the information. Each section addresses specific user needs, such as setting up the phone or troubleshooting common problems.
- **Clarity**: The language is simple and direct, which is crucial for ensuring that all users, regardless of their technical expertise, can understand the instructions.
- **Visuals**: The use of visuals, such as step-by-step images, diagrams, and icons, helps users quickly grasp how to perform certain tasks without needing to read long paragraphs of text.