

Defining the Field Essay

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Defining technical communication is like trying to identify what is depicted in an abstract piece of art. There are certain things that are true about the painting, like that there is paint and a canvas, but there is an element of the unknown because the picture lends itself to an individual interpretation by each observer. Likewise, technical communication has some truths: it is messages that are communicated to receivers and technology is used to help facilitate that communication. Unfortunately, just as someone else cannot interpret abstract art for someone else, all interpretations of technical communication are subjective in nature. Therefore, my subjective interpretation may vary from another's point of view. In my definition, I will mention several significant elements that I deem as inherent truths in technical communication, and ultimately I will place myself in the field as I relate to the elements I highlight.

Technical communication calls its audience to action. Whether that action is laid out in a step-by-step instruction manual, a tutorial video, medical instructions, or lesson plan, the communication calls for the viewer to interact with the information. As Slack et al. (1993) explain, the receiver is expected to interact with the material, not simply receive a transmitted message. The articulation model accurately highlights the benefits and influence of a technical writer. An author is nearly in a relationship with the receiver as the communication is articulated and rearticulated to create meaning between sender and receiver (p. 25). Technical writing will not be read and left alone, if used properly, and as anticipated by the writer, the reader will think differently or be moved to action or change, as Rude (2009) points out.

Technical communication is structured. The method of a technical writer is perhaps, at times, systematic and deliberate. This is not to say that a technical communicator will not be creative, thoughtful, or even revolutionary. There is an element of technique and grammatical

conventions involved in this work, but the work doesn't stop there. A computer could not do this type of work. Technical writers have to take on the world as it is and seek to make it better.

Technical writing is all around us. We read technical documents in nearly every space, due to the broad reach of this field. Everything important, including medical and insurance documents, employment paperwork, educational documents, and everyday encounters with technology, are part of the wide reach of technical communication. These invaluable documents are in our daily lives, so we cannot overlook the need for great technical communicators. Thus, the need for a structured, easy to understand approach is essential. If technical communicators stopped doing their job effectively, many aspects in society would begin to crumble as people wandered, lost without clear information. How information is presented is half the battle. Technical communicators could change the world, if they all rallied around the same cause for social change because their work is so ubiquitous. In fact, it is so ubiquitous that it often goes unseen and is, therefore, underappreciated, but therein lies its subtle powers.

It is up to the technical communicator to advocate for inclusion through their work. This has to be done subtly and naturally. It is up to the communicator to be deeply invested in making their content accessible by all in the audience, and pitching the content in a way that is natural and inclusive is key. Technical writing does not draw attention to itself, so it has a powerful influence as a whole genre/field. Jones et al. (2016) suggest that "*Inclusion* means that there is respect for everyone's voices, stories, and knowledges" (p. 219). Technical communicators go into their work planning ahead to design content that is accurate, just, and inclusive, which includes thinking about how their content will be perceived by those looking at it from different perspectives. Making content available means making it available for everyone to see the content for what it is and not how it's presented. The presentation cannot get in the way of the message.

Technical communicators wield technology to help their messages reach as many as possible in effective ways.

Intangibility is a strength. Some may argue that an inability to concisely define the field shows weakness and lack of meaning, but this couldn't be farther from the truth. Because this work is so adaptable in various settings, a technical communicator gets the opportunity to highlight their own talents within the field and in regards to their individual work. In their research on the lives of technical writers, Brumberger and Lauer (2020) found that “understanding conceptually how different types of programs function seemed more important than knowing the specific workings of a particular tool” (p. 322). They highlight how flexible technical communicators need to be because their tools are ever changing, and so are their very job titles/labels. I would add to Brumberger and Lauer's personas by saying that there is a persona that is even harder to define; it's the *unseen technical communicator*. This technical communicator does seemingly normal, everyday type things, but is deeply entrenched in technical communication. This would include creators of beauty tutorial videos, mommy bloggers, teachers, and family reunion committee members.

The work we will do as technical communicators is varied, but the underlying elements are the same. I see myself in three possible places doing the daily work of a technical communicator. Perhaps writing grants and lesson plans in a secondary school. Perhaps editing content for a business. Perhaps working as a media/communication specialist for a humanitarian company. In any profession, however, I see myself doing the work of a strong technical communicator, which will include calling my audience to action, writing in a structured, technical way, and seeking inclusion. How I do my work and the tools I use will change over time, but the work I do will make a real difference—and that part will never change.

The field of technical communication cannot be defined concretely and objectively by anyone because every person must define the field for themselves, highlighting areas that are most important to their individual work. A technical writer could be editing most of their time, designing social media content, or writing curriculum. It's as broad as saying "I paint for a living." This statement leaves one asking more questions. What mediums do you use? What is your style? What are you painting—canvases, objects, walls, pumpkins? As I define it for myself, technical communication, generally speaking, includes any time there is a message sent that, when received, initiates movement in the receiver; and technology is assisting in the sending of the message. I could be doing this work as an editor, teacher, or media/communication specialist, but the important aspects of the work are unchanging. More specifically, my own personal technical communication canvas is an abstract piece of art right now, which I'm still interpreting, as I'm not set on what I will do post-graduation. However, I see myself utilizing each of the elements I've outlined as core values in the technical communication field.

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