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Minimalist Tutoring and Technical Writing:

Guiding Tutors through an Unfamiliar Genre

Writing center tutors, regardless of their expertise in a particular field of study, work with students across the academic curriculum. Some tutors may be comfortable working with subjects like literature and history, while others become anxious when working with a student's philosophical exegesis or lab report. Nevertheless, writing center tutors often encounter similar types of assignments across tutorials, or have taken a class on an unfamiliar genre, or at the very least have a vague understanding of what an unfamiliar genre or assignment entails. However, even though its name may not seem unusual or immediately trigger a sense of panic in a writing center tutor, the genre of technical writing may be an area of study that many tutors have yet to encounter.

Minimalism can be defined as "a style or technique (as in music, literature, or design) that is characterized by extreme spareness and simplicity" ("Minimalism"). I believe that writing center tutors tend to perceive technical writing as a minimalist genre of writing in that technical documents should be basic, concise and straightforward. That is, technical documents should avoid the complexity and eloquence typically found genres like literary analysis and should only employ a basic writing style that addresses the audience's needs. How would a writing center tutor use a minimalist approach when working with a student and his or her technical writing document? Since technical writing strongly emphasizes audience analysis, contextual analysis, and tone, a writing center tutor could use a minimalist approach most effectively during the planning stages of the document and when discussing global issues.

It would seem that in order to help a student make his or her technical writing document more concise and straightforward, a tutor would most benefit from using a directive approach; for local concerns like diction and sentence length are often viewed as issues that tutors address by giving direct instructions and suggestions. Linda K. Shamoon and Deborah H. Burns argue, "When a tutor redrafts problematic portions of a text for a student, the changes usually strengthen the disciplinary argument and improve the connection to current conversation in the discipline" (Burns and Shamoon 185). It seems that providing the student models that can be "imitated, practiced, mastered, and questioned" can be easily applied to sentence-level issues, as the tutor can present examples of proper diction and sentence length, rather than possibly confusing the student through discussion about grammatical issues that he or she may not understand (Burns and Shamoon 185). However, does directive tutoring provide these benefits across all writing disciplines including technical writing?

Because the features and goals of technical writing strongly relate to the concept of minimalism, it would seem that minimalist (i.e., non-directive) tutoring would be the more appropriate method in addressing technical writing. To implement minimalist tutoring, Jeff Brooks argues that the "tutor should take on a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own writing" (Brooks 169). Brooks continues to argue, "A student who comes to the writing center and passively receives knowledge from a tutor will not be any closer to his own paper than he was when he walked in. He may leave with an improved paper, but he will not have learned much" (Brooks 169). Brooks believes that having the student essentially lead the tutorial will keep the tutor from making any changes to the student's work, thus allowing the student to take full responsibility for his or her work. DePaul University Writing Center tutor, Elizabeth Tavares, defines minimalist tutoring as "a technique in which

the tutor empowers the tutee, via open-ended yet critical-thinking questions, to make revisions and improvements to their own writing" (Tavares). Tavares' fellow tutor, Zachary Edmonds, believes that minimalist tutoring "focuses on collaboration and conversation between the tutor and writer" in which "the writer is able to actively learn and retain the information discussed in a given appointment" (Edmonds). Employing this conversational technique in which the tutor primarily uses questioning to help the student seems to be very effective in helping the student independently learn and revise his or her work. However, because no single tutoring technique can perfectly apply to every writing discipline and every part of the writing process, it is important to discuss how both directive and non-directive tutoring can be applied to a technical writing tutorial.

I believe that a major difficulty for writing center tutors in working with a technical writing assignment begins with defining technical writing and understanding what types of documents this genre encompasses. As I near the completion of a technical writing course I am currently taking at DePaul University, I have experienced firsthand the ambiguity of defining technical writing. Because I have some knowledge of technical writing and have composed several technical documents, I will respond to each of the following scholars' viewpoints based on my experiences working with technical writing.

University of Michigan English professor, W. Earl Britton, argues that technical writing involves technical subject matter, specialized vocabulary, sequential thought, and functional writing. Furthermore, he defines the primary characteristic of technical writing as the author's goal "to convey one meaning and only one meaning in what [he or she] says" (Britton 114). Britton combines several characteristics to define technical writing, but perhaps the most

difficult aspects of grounding this definition are specifying the subject matter and the types of documents through which the subject matter is written.

As the Assistant Director of DePaul University's Center for Writing-based Learning and a professor of technical writing, Liz Coughlin indicates that although it is difficult to pinpoint the origin of technical writing, technical writing began to surface in the military, more specifically "during and after the Second World War," as there was a need for manuals to operate complex weaponry and machinery (Coughlin). As technology entered more industries and became more commonplace, technical writing began to enter the fields of engineering and the sciences, where there was a need for "explaining and describing various products and processes, and doing so in great detail" (Coughlin). However, Coughlin argues that today, the genre of technical writing in the college curriculum, specifically at DePaul University, has been combined with professional writing, encompassing the field of business writing (e.g., memorandums, resumes, proposals and reports) and emerging in different professions and industries (Coughlin). Regardless of the difficulty of distinguishing between technical and professional writing, Coughlin argues that the key elements of technical writing are "context and audience, which defines so much of what the [technical] document itself needs to do" (Coughlin). I believe that combining Britton and Coughlin's definitions provides a comprehensive overview of what technical writing can entail. However, because of the many subgenres within the field, I would define technical writing even more broadly as any type of writing that tries to clearly and concisely communicate information in an appropriate tone to a specific audience.

Even though the line between what constitutes technical and professional writing may be blurred, both types of writing have similar qualities that are specific to their purpose. To first

determine how a writing center tutor would use a minimalist approach when working with a student and his or her technical writing document, the tutor must understand the qualities that make technical writing effective. In evaluating the effectiveness of technical papers and reports, marketing scientist, A.S.C. Ehrenberg, proposes five rules that he believes will improve technical writing—"(1) Start at the end; (2) Be prepared to revise; (3) Cut down on long words; (4) Be brief; (5) Think of the reader" (Ehrenberg 326). Ehrenberg's final rule, "think of the reader," is one of the most important aspects of technical writing that encompasses his four previous rules. By starting at the end of the document, cutting down on long words and being brief, the writer makes the document much easier and less stressful to read. However, in addition to the increasing documents readability, Ehrenberg argues that the writer must keep in mind the reader's intended use of the document and the purpose for which the document is written (Ehrenberg 329). All genres of writing have an audience that the writer must acknowledge when creating a document. However, technical writing, whether it is a proposal, report or manual, has a practical use and specific purpose that makes audience analysis a far more critical priority. Ehrenberg's expert knowledge of consumer buying behavior and advertising acts as a great model for how technical documents should be structured and written. Writing center tutors can reference these rules before and during a tutorial to determine how well a student's document follows the format of successful technical writing.

In examining Britton, Coughlin and Ehrenberg's viewpoints of technical writing, I believe that Coughlin's view of audience and context and Ehrenberg's fifth rule, "think of the reader," are the most important areas of focus in creating a technical document. For example, I created a product description booklet for a portable navigation device during my technical writing class this academic quarter. In order to create this booklet, my professor instructed me

to first determine the audience who would be reading my booklet and in what context they would be reading it. I decided to direct my product description towards senior citizens with limited technical knowledge, who have trouble reading maps while driving due to the small print. By clearly defining all technical terms, using graphics, and making the text large and concise, I successfully described an unfamiliar device for a specific audience and context. If the booklet did not properly address the audience's need to learn the device's basic features, or contained small text and technical terms that were not defined, then the manual would have been useless. Therefore, a writing center tutor must implement the most appropriate techniques to help a student understand the audience's needs and how to best formulate the technical document to successfully meet these needs.

Now that the qualities of technical writing have been clarified, we must discuss how directive and minimalist approaches can be applied to a technical writing tutorial in order to determine what techniques are most appropriate. Steven J. Corbett, a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at the University of Washington , Seattle, believes that the problem with the directive/non-directive debate is that people often overlook the stage of the tutee's document upon beginning the tutorial. Corbett suggests that beginning the tutorial by asking the tutee what stage his or her draft is in can help determine how the tutor should approach the tutorial:

> For example, if a student is in the early phases of a draft, then perhaps tutors can take a more minimalist approach, asking questions, trying not to get too hands on. If the student is working on a "final" draft, then it would be more appropriate for a tutor to get involved in some of the more hands-on "scratching out" and "rewriting" Harris speaks of. (Corbett)

Corbett addresses the directive/non-directive debate in a general sense, not specifying a type of tutorial or assignment. However, Corbett does believe that the beginning stages of draft, when planning and global issues are of most importance, are more suitable for a minimalist approach, while are more polished draft, when sentence-level issues like diction and conciseness become areas of focus, is more suitable for a more directive approach. Therefore, Corbett's suggestions can be applied to a technical writing tutorial, as the planning stages and global issues of a technical document can be better addressed with a minimalist approach, while local and sentence-level issues can better addressed through a directive approach.

DePaul University Writing Center tutor, Zachary Edmonds, believes that it would be easier for a writing center tutor to use a directive approach rather than a non-directive approach when the student's technical writing document "seems pretty polished but still has some small grammatical errors" (Edmonds). Even though Edmonds believes that a directive approach can be used during a technical writing tutorial, he indicates that being more directive would be most effective "[o]nce the piece of writing has already been through revisions" (Edmonds). Liz Coughlin believes a directive approach would be appropriate when discussing the document's format (e.g., with resumes and memos) or design (e.g., using headings and widows and orphans). Coughlin believes that a directive approach can help clarify appearance issues that "the writer really doesn't know and needs to know, or doesn't realize and really needs to realize" (Coughlin). Issues of format and appearance, though very important in technical writing, may not directly affect the content of a document. Therefore, even though Edmonds and Coughlin believe that a directive approach can be used during a technical writing tutorial, a minimalist approach seems to be more appropriate during the beginning stages of writing when grammatical and appearance issues are not a primary concern.

DePaul University Writing Center tutor, Rachel Salsedo, believes that minimalist tutoring can be used during a technical writing tutorial by "asking honest, probing questions about the audience… to redirect attention back to the demographic the document" (Salsedo). Salsedo suggests asking questions like, "What message is this document sending to its intended audience?" or, "Who else besides the intended audience might see it?" (Salsedo). These types of questions, Salsedo believes, help the student shape his or her text in accordance with the audience's needs and expectations. Salsedo's fellow tutor, Andrew Roback, believes that in order to help the student address the technical document's audience, "the tutor can assume the role of quasi-audience during the session and indirectly model the responses that the student should be independently anticipating when critically self-analyzing his/her piece of tech writing" (Roback). Though Salsedo and Roback's suggestions employ somewhat differing techniques, both stress the importance of using questioning to help the student understand the audience's needs and how identifying these needs can shape the effectiveness of a technical document.

To help a student reach his or her intended audience, another DePaul University Writing Center tutor, Nancy Rinehart, will "ask any student who brings in a technical document to read closely for tone and to consider how their intended audience will respond to the document based on that tone" (Rinehart). If the tone of the document, whether it be directive, condescending or unclear, does not help the reader accomplish his or her intended task, then the reader will probably not find the document useful. Similarly, Rinehart's fellow tutor, Madeline Mason, believes:

> When it comes to memos and communications between companies or members of an office, I think that minimalist tutoring can be used to a much greater effect.

> Tone and word choice [can] be addressed through minimalist tutoring, and I believe that students will [benefit] more through indirect approaches with these types of assignments. (Mason)

Rinehart and Mason's responses reveal how they approach a technical writing tutorial, stressing how a minimalist approach can help a student address the document's tone. To successfully address a specific audience, the writer must use the correct tone to prevent the reader from misinterpreting the information, or becoming frustrated by unfamiliar terms that are not defined.

Because minimalist tutoring aims at having students make the necessary changes to their writing and come to their own realizations, a writing center tutor can properly implement minimalist tutoring through discussion and questioning. Minimalist tutoring, as described by Brooks, is a method that should be implemented in any type of tutorial and during any time of the writing processes. However, after interviewing Liz Coughlin and several DePaul University Writing Center tutors about technical writing tutorials, I believe that in working with a student's technical writing document, a minimalist approach can be most effectively used in addressing the document's global issues like audience, context and tone. Therefore, a technical document will not be successful unless it is effectively written for the target audience in the correct context and tone, thus making the document's global issues a higher concern than its local issues during the beginning stages of the tutorial.

To demonstrate how a writing center tutor can use a minimalist approach when working with a student and his or her technical writing document, I will provide an example of how I would approach a technical writing tutorial. I would begin the tutorial by first asking the student a series of questions about the technical document's purpose and intended audience:

What type of document is this? What are your trying to accomplish with this document? Whom are you writing this for? Is there anyone else who might read your document? What is the technical knowledge of your intended audience? How might your audience react to graphics or different font sizes? These types of questions will build the foundation for how the student structures the information for his or her document. For example, if the technical document is a strategy guide for advanced poker players, then the student would not have to describe the rules of different poker games because the audience is already assumed to have that knowledge based on their skill level. Similarly, a strategy guide for beginner poker players would include more basic information like the rules of different poker games, as the writer would not assume that the audience already possesses this knowledge.

After gaining a clear understanding of the document's intended audience, I would then ask a series of questions about the document's context: *In what kind of environment will your document be read? When will your audience read your document? How will the size of your document affect its effectiveness? Would a booklet or pamphlet be more convenient than a large manual?* These types of questions help the student determine the factors that will affect the audience while reading the document and how the student can structure the document so that the information is presented effectively. For example, if the technical document is an instruction guide for fixing a leaky faucet, the student would probably want to create a laminated booklet or pamphlet that is resistant to water damage and easily accessible while trying to complete the task. By beginning the tutorial with audience and contextual analysis, I would not only better understand the student's assignment and document, but the student would also better understand the importance of analyzing audience and context, and the amount of work that needs to be done in order to create a successful document.

When student has a strong understanding of the document's audience and context, then I would continue to ask questions about the document's tone: *What type of tone would be most appropriate for your audience: formal, moderately formal or informal? Is there a lot of technical terminology that you need to define? How would a moderately formal or informal tone affect the way your document is read?* These types of questions would help the student understand that the document's expression is just as important as the information that is being conveyed. For example, if the technical document is a research proposal intended to persuade an academic department to provide funding for a project, the student should use a formal tone and avoid using slang or humor. Similarly, if the technical document is an instruction manual to help college students budget money, then the student's tone can be moderately formal and include terminology that would make the document more personable and fitting for the audience. Choosing the appropriate tone in relation to the document's audience and context would allow the student to have a better understanding of the type of writing style and words he or she should use, which would transition nicely into the document's local and sentence-level issues like diction and conciseness.

After discussing the technical document's audience, context and tone I would then address any local and sentence-level issues that may be of concern. I would attempt to use a minimalist approach for these issues, asking the student how they might be able to improve their sentence structure or word choice, but I believe that using a directive approach and providing examples for these types of issues would be more helpful, especially if there are things that the student simply does not know (e.g., grammar rules and proper formatting). As mentioned throughout this paper, local and sentence-level issues are secondary to audience, context and tone (global issues). If the student's document is fairly polished and properly

addresses these global issues, then I would help the student with his or her expression, providing examples for proper diction, sentence-length and any other issues that may inhibit the audience from accomplishing their intended task.

Writing center tutors can approach a technical writing tutorial several ways depending on the stage of the technical document and how well the student understands the goals of his or her assignment. After analyzing the viewpoints and suggestions of university scholars and writing center tutors, I believe that even though students may not frequently come to a writing center with a technical writing assignment, it is important that tutors understand how to approach a technical writing tutorial. In order to do this, tutors should have a general understanding of what constitutes technical writing and what makes a technical document effective. However, if tutors are completely unfamiliar with technical writing, then it is imperative that they ask the necessary questions, as previously discussed in my example method, about the student's document at the start of the tutorial. These questions should help the tutor understand the document's purpose, audience, context and tone, and help the student understand how these issues will determine the efficacy of his or her document. By beginning a technical writing tutorial with a minimalist approach and focusing on the document's audience, context and tone, a writing center tutor can help students create a practical document that helps its readers accomplish a specific task.

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