



Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBoK)

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Technical communication is such a wide-ranging and diverse profession that it is difficult to identify what it is that makes us, as technical communicators, unique.

What makes us different from journalists, from business analysts, from other communications professionals?

In order to define this difference we decided to start developing a Body of Knowledge (TCBoK) for our profession. The US-based Society for Technical Communication (STC) have had a TCBoK project active for several years, but we felt that it was a valuable exercise in itself to consider our own local skills, interests and abilities, rather than simply copy what STC have done.

Some occupations have identified standards and accepted practice for the foundation of their profession, for example, project management (PMBok) and business analysis (BABok). The BoK can then be used to define best practice and can, in due course, be a basis for technical communication certification.

To begin the process of compiling a TCBoK, we held brainstorming sessions in Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington and Melbourne in May and June this year.

The aim was to try to identify the combination of attributes, skills and knowledge that would be expected of professional technical communicators.

There are many interesting and esoteric skills that can arguably be included in our body of knowledge, but we wanted to keep the initial BoK at a reasonably high level. We didn't want to drill down to the n^{th} degree as we felt that there is a point at which you get a diminishing return – and lose sight of the overall picture.

Once all the sessions were complete, we rationalised the results and organised all the lists of skills and knowledge into categories. All four sessions resulted in similar lists.

We ended up with the following seven categories which we feel is a good foundation for our Body of Knowledge:

1. Writing
2. Research and analysis
3. Design, structure and layout
4. Editing and quality control
5. Output and publishing
6. Management, planning and organisation
7. Other skills, including computer skills, tools and domain knowledge.



Figure 1. A diagram representing our main Body of Knowledge categories.

Within each of these categories we recorded about a page of related skills and knowledge.

There are obviously some core skills and knowledge that we must all have. As we progress (in both years and skill level), we will typically continue to add other useful skills and knowledge to our toolkit.

The next step is to further break down the TCBoK into the core skills you need to start in the profession as a junior, the skills you need to acquire to be able to work alone and then a further set of skills to become a master craftsman.

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Interestingly, in addition to recording skills and knowledge, the discussion at several of the brainstorming sessions evolved into a discussion about how technical writing differs from other types of writing, the types of output that we produce and the “soft” skills and personal attributes that members of our profession generally exhibit.

It gradually became clear through the process of analysing the output of these discussions that we all have a similar set of personal attributes and interpersonal skills and that we need these to be effective technical communicators.

Brainstorming session results

The following sections are the lists that don’t specifically relate to skills and knowledge.

The basic business need that we meet

- Imparting / delivering information.

How we differ from other types of communication/writing

- Technical focus in many cases
- Write to educate and inform
- Objective, fact-based
- Accurate, clear, concise
- Information must be structured and presented so that the audience can find what they need as easily as possible
- We target a specific audience so that they are able to make decisions or perform tasks.

What we produce

- Advertisements
- Annual reports, Board reports
- Blogs, tweets, social media pages/content
- Bulk emails
- Forms
- Graphics
- Health and safety compliance manuals
- HTML coding/scripting
- Information management strategies
- Interactive guides

- Intranet content
- Management papers, proposals, tenders, RFPs, RFQs
- Newsletters
- Phone help
- Policies
- Posters
- Presentations
- Processes and procedures (design and/or document)
- Product manuals / user guides
- Quick start guides
- Scientific papers / publications
- Specifications
- Standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- Standardised, single-sourced content
- Standards
- Style guides, style sheets, templates
- Surveys / quizzes
- Training materials, education manuals / online modules (self-paced learning)
- Videos / screencasts – both screen capture and story telling
- Visual basic (VB) programming / macro design
- Web content.

Typical personal attributes

During the brainstorming sessions, we asked participants to list personal attributes that they thought were typical of technical communicators. The attributes suggested during the sessions are in the following list. These have a strong relationship to the Myers-Briggs personality types identified by Andrea Wenger. (See following page.)

- Accurate with good attention to detail
- Adaptive and flexible
- Analytical
- Confident and assertive
- Curious about the world and able to find anything interesting
- Diplomatic, patient, practical
- Hard working, honest
- Disciplined self-manager
- Improver
- Methodical and objective
- Problem solver
- Quick learner
- Self-motivator
- Well-read.

Able to:

- step back and see the big picture as well as being able to focus in on detail when required
- distil information to an appropriate level of detail and complexity for the audience
- explain things well and at an appropriate level for the audience
- question / interview and mine for information
- think analytically, and apply reason and logic
- understand highly technical information.