**WRITE TO LEARN**

Think about the many types of writing you do—for example, writing for school, on your job, in a diary or journal for self-expression, or to family and friends. With what kind of writing are you most comfortable? What kind of writing do you find most difficult or most uncomfortable? Of the writing you do, which would you consider to be technical writing? How would you define the term *technical communication?*

Read the sample writing excerpts on pages 3–5.

• What is the subject?

• For whom was the document written?

• How is the document organized?

• How would you describe the writer’s (or writers’) style?

• What is the tone of the document?

• Does the document include any special features (for example, boldfacing, numbering, bulleted lists, visual aids, headings, or subheadings)?

What Is Technical Writing?

Writing @work

Mark Overbay manages marketing and communications for Counter Culture Coffee, a Durham, North Carolina–based specialty coffee organization. His many responsibilities include producing product copy, white papers, advertisements, packaging copy, online content, thematic signage, and tradeshow displays.

“Marketing is a form of storytelling,” says Mark, who believes that marketing copy must be “short and sweet.” “You only have a few words or phrases to ‘hook’ your readers, whether they are journalists reading a press release or grocery shoppers glancing at the coffee bags on a shelf. Good marketing copy must tell an interesting, sometimes even romantic story, but it should never be long-winded.”

Mark’s biggest technical writing challenge involves presentation and style: “Developing a Counter Culture Coffee ‘voice’ that authentically represents our company and all that we do is the most difficult aspect of my professional writing. When I write for our online news section or blog, I can write as Mark Overbay; but most of my professional writing is in the voice of Counter Culture Coffee, which represents not just me, but more than 40 staff members and hundreds of partnering coffee farmers.”

Mark relies heavily on e-mail. “E-mail, for all its limitations and sterility, is invaluable in my professional life. Not only does it allow for structured written communication and instant delivery, but it also provides a permanent record of every e-conversation.”

Mark advises aspiring technical writers to hone three skills in particular: (1) work ethic to constantly improve their writing; (2) preparation and care for each assignment because “. . . every word and detail matters. Successful communicators take the time to research their subjects thoroughly”; and (3) clarity because “successful communicators keep things simple—not dumbed down—and to the point. Be clear, concise, and confident in your message.”

**YOU ARE A TECHNICAL WRITER!**

Have you ever given someone written directions or drawn a map to your home? Have you ever written brief instructions for how to use a fax machine at work? Have you ever told someone how to make French toast? If you answered yes to any of those questions or have had similar experiences, you have already engaged in technical writing or technical communication.

**Definition of Technical Writing** Candace, an award-winning saxophonist, began teaching saxophone lessons to sixth graders. For the first lesson, she drew a diagram of an alto sax and created a step-by-step guide explaining how to take the instrument apart and reassemble it. When she saw how easily students could follow her instructions, she was pleased that her words were helping them learn to do something she enjoyed.

Candace might have been surprised to learn that she was using technical communication. **Technical communication** is communication done in the workplace. The message usually involves a technical subject with a specific purpose and audience. The approach is straightforward. Candace was giving practical information to a specific audience—information that would enable her audience to take action. When she referred to the diagram and explained the procedure aloud to her students, she was using technical communication. When she wrote the instructions to accompany her diagram, she was using technical writing. **Technical writing** is writing done in the workplace, although the workplace may be an office, a construction site, or a kitchen table. The subject is usually technical, written carefully for a specific audience. The organization is predictable and apparent, the style is concise, and the tone is objective and businesslike. Special features may include visual elements to enhance the message.

Use the *You Are a Technical Writer* worksheet as a guide to brainstorm the types of technical writing you already know. Go to www.cengage. com/school/bcomm/techwtg. Click the link for Chapter 1; then click Data Files.

Good writers understand that they will not always know who is reading their writing (especially e-mail) or how their writing will be used.

Technical documents can range from a half-page memo announcing the winner of a sales competition to a 500-page research grant proposal requesting money to test a new drug for treating obesity. The term *technical writing* describes documents produced in areas such as business, science, social science, engineering, and education. Sales catalogs, business letters, financial reports, standard operating procedures, medical research studies, lab reports—all of these and more are examples of technical writing.

**Technical Writing Is Essential in the Workplace** Written communication is essential in the workplace for many reasons. It allows readers to read and study at their convenience, easily pass along information to others, and keep a permanent record for future reference.

Regardless of the career you choose, you will write in the workplace. According to Paul V. Anderson in *Technical Communication: A Reader- Centered Approach,* conservative estimates suggest that you will spend at least 20 percent of your time writing in a technical or business occupation. Professionals in engineering and technology careers spend as much as 40 percent of their time writing.

In today’s business environment, employees can easily be overwhelmed by information overload, with information competing for their attention from every direction—television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, e-mail, the Internet, CD-ROMs, and DVDs. Because of information overload, you must be able to read documents quickly and efficiently, understand them the first time you read them, and know that the information is accurate. Up-to-date information provides companies with a competitive edge, speeding critical decision making and allowing job specialization.

Technical writers who help companies manage the information overload are vital resources. They understand that their readers must be able to skim or skip text and find important information quickly. As a professional in great demand, the technical writer faces a challenging, exciting, and rewarding future.

Different careers generate different kinds of reports: Nurses chart a patient’s medical condition so that the next shift’s nurses can continue patient care. Police accident reports record facts for later use in court. Chemists and engineers document procedures to comply with government regulations. Accountants prepare annual client reports. Sales representatives write sales proposals. Professors write grant proposals. Park rangers write safety precautions. Insurance claims adjusters write incident reports. Travel agents design brochures. Public relations officers write news releases, letters, and speeches.

When you write, you demonstrate your ability to analyze, solve problems, and understand technical processes. For example, Matheus Cardoso, personnel director for Osgood Textile Industries, impresses his supervisor and earns his colleagues’ respect when his proposal for tax-deferred retirement plans is approved. On the other hand, the drafting crew at Stillman Manufacturing is frustrated with Jeff Danelli’s instructions for installing wireless computing at the industrial site. The crew must redraft plans because Jeff’s instructions are vague and incomplete. When writing is not clear, the thinking behind the writing may not be clear either.

All careers rely on technical communication to get the job done. Technical writing is the great connector—the written link—connecting technology to user, professional to client, colleague to colleague, supervisor to employee, and individual to community. No matter what career you choose, you can expect to read and compose e-mail, send accompanying attachments, give and receive phone messages, and explain procedures.

In addition to work-related writing, the responsibilities of being a community and family member require technical communication.

**Questions:**

1. Discuss the importance of technical writing in the workplace.
2. What is technical writing? And how is it different from technical communication?