Ethics in writing

Ethical behavior, including ethical technical communication, involves not just telling the truth and providing accurate information, but telling the truth and providing information so that a reasonable audience knows the truth. It also means that you act to prevent actual harm, with set criteria for what kinds and degrees of harm are more serious than others (for example, someone's life outweighs financial damage to your company; your company's success outweighs your own irritation). As a guideline, ask yourself what would happen if your action (or non-action) became public. If you would go to prison, lose your friends, lose your job, or even just feel really embarrassed, the action is probably unethical.

Presentation of information

How a writer presents information in a document can affect a reader's understanding of the relative weight or seriousness of that information. For example, hiding some crucial bit of information in the middle of a long paragraph deep in a long document seriously de-emphasizes the information. On the other hand, putting a minor point in a prominent spot (say the first item in a bulleted list in a report's executive summary) tells your reader that it is crucial.

Typical Ethics Issues in Technical Writing:

There are a few issues that may come up when researching a topic for the business or technical world that a writer must consider. Let's look at a few.

Research that does not support the project idea

In a technical report that contains research, a writer might discover conflicting data which does not support the projects' goal. For example, your small company continues to have problems with employee morale. Research shows bringing in an outside expert, someone who is unfamiliar with the company and the stakeholders, has the potential to impact the greatest change. You discover, however, that to bring in such an expert is cost prohibitive. You struggle with whether to leave this information out of your report, thereby encouraging your employer to pursue and action that is really not feasible.

Suppressing relevant information

Imagine you are researching a report for a parents' group that wants to change the policy in the local school district requiring all students to be vaccinated. You collect a handful of sources that support the group's goal, but then you discover medical evidence that indicates vaccines do more good than potential harm in society. Since you are employed by this parents' group, should you leave out the medical evidence, or do you have a responsibility to include all research, even some that might sabotage the groups' goal.

Presenting visual information ethically

Visuals can be useful for communicating data and information efficiently for a reader. They provide data in a concentrated form, often illustrating key facts, statistics or information from the text of the report. When writers present information

visually, however, they have to be careful not to misrepresent or misreport the complete picture.

Limited source information in research

Thorough research requires that a writer integrates information from a variety of reliable sources. These sources should demonstrate that the writer has examined the topic from as many angles as possible. This includes scholarly and professional research, not just from a single database or journal, for instance, but from a variety.

Other Concerns

Most ethics violations in technical writing are (probably) unintentional, BUT they are still ethics violations. That means a technical writer must consciously identify his/her biases and check to see if a bias has influenced any presentation: whether in charts and graphs, or in discussions of the evidence, or in source use (or, of course, in putting the crucial O ring information where the launch decision makers would realize it was important).

Ethics and documenting sources

Documenting your sources includes showing exactly what you borrowed both where you used it and in a Works Cited, Works, or References (the different terms reflect different documentation systems, not just random preference) list at the end.

Including an item only in the source list at the end suggests you have used the source in the report, but if you have not cited

this source in the text as well, you could be seen as misleading the reader.

Unethical source use includes suppressing information about how you have used a source, such as not making clear that graphical information in your report was already a graph in your source, as opposed to a graph you created on the basis of information in the source.

Note that many problems in documenting sources occur because the writer is missing the point of source use: you must clearly distinguish between your ideas and borrowed material, and you must use borrowed material primarily as evidence for your own, directly stated ideas.

Ethics, Plagiarism, and Reliable Sources

Unlike personal or academic writing, technical and professional writing can be used to evaluate your job performance and can have implications that a writer may or may not have considered. Whether you are writing for colleagues within your workplace or outside vendors or customers, you will want to build a solid, well-earned favorable reputation for yourself with your writing. Your goal is to maintain and enhance your credibility, and that of your organization, at all times.

Professional ethics

Many organizations and employers have a corporate code of ethics. If you are a technical writer and you join a professional association such as the Society of Technical Communicators you will need to be aware their codes of ethics, published online.

Appropriate Language in Technical Communication

writers use inappropriate metaphors in technical communication that reduce the credibility of the scientific writing or research that they are trying to communicate to the public. It is better to communicate precisely, and to use appropriate metaphors so that if, for example, later contradictory information becomes available, the public does not dismiss scientific findings.

Ethics and Copyright Law

Another important aspect of ethics involves awareness of and respect for copyright law. The purpose behind copyright law is the protection of the creator's creation. To prevent such theft and unethical use, there are copyright laws. To use an image, photograph, icon, logo, graph, chart, or layout that was not created by the user and for which the user has no agreement or authorization is an infringement of copyright.