

Lecture Notes:
Careers In Technical Communication
Day One: Technical Communication Zeitgeist

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UC Berkeley Extension San Francisco Center

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- 4: *And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*
- 5: *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.*
- 6: *And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.*
- 7: *Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.*
- 8: *So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.*

Genesis 11:4-8

Why We're Here

- To explore what today's technical communication field is really like
- To examine ways you can repurpose your current skill set, and add new skills, to become successful as a technical communicator
- To help you get your foot in the door

Setting Expectations

This seminar does not push a particular Technical Communication program.

It catalogs professional organizations for technical communicators, but does not endorse any in particular.

It does not teach you how to become a technical communicator.

It does...

- Paint a realistic picture of the joys and limitations of the profession
- Point you to general resources that will ...
 - help you decide if you even want to do this
 - help you maximize your current skill set
 - help you grow new skills, and
 - help you get your first technical communication job

Who Is Freda Salatino?

- Early career incarnations
- How I got into technical communication
- What I love about it
- What I hate about it
- Where I'd like to take my career next
- Why I'm here

Who Are You?

- Your name
- Current occupation
- Related seminars you've attended
- One thing you'd especially like to see us cover this weekend

A Brief History of Technical Communication

- The Oral Tradition
- The Written Tradition: prehistory
- The Written Tradition: for the priesthood only
- The Written Tradition: for the rich and famous only
- Tabloids and Prairie Home Companions
- The Industrial Revolution
- Mass Production
- De-mystifying Technology: WWII through the '60's
- Transistorization
- Fear And Loathing Of Technology
- The Lowest Common Denominator

Bottom Line:

The soul of a society is preserved in amber, in its stories, artifacts, and processes.

Without technical documentation, the only way to replicate anything is via archaeology.

What Do Technical Communicators Do?

Most Technical communicators

research,

codify,

crystallize,

clarify, and

disseminate

information that is essential to the manufacture, operation, or maintenance of a particular device or service.

They can do this as:

- Traditional Technical Writers
- High-level Technical Writers
- Course/Training Material Developers
- Knowledge Engineers
- Data Miners/Analysts
- Technical Journalists
- Grants/Proposal Writers

Traditional Technical Writers

- Create very “low end” technical documents, including repair and reference manuals, “man” pages, scientific papers and research reports, and technical specs
- Audience: technical professionals
- Writing style: formal; lots of technical jargon
- Requires fairly deep technical background in the subject area

High-level Technical Writers

- Create “user-friendly” technical documents, including user’s guides, operating or procedure instructions, and reports to non- or semi-technical readers
- Audience: non-technical consumers
- Writing style: less formal; little or no jargon
- Writer should be a “power user” of the product or device

Course/Training Material Developers

- Develop training courses and instructional material used by people who teach technology topics (includes Computer-based Tutorials, or CBT)
- Audience: depends on the subject matter
- Writing style: user-friendly
- Writer should be a “power user” of the product or device; teaching background helpful

Knowledge Engineers

- Develop and maintain content for database- and/or web-driven knowledge systems
- Audience: generally less technical
- Writing style: modular
- Requires good general background in the subject area

A knowledge system is a device that enables users to chart their own path through a sea of information, renewing their acquaintance with what they already know and discovering connections to new resources.

Users navigate through a knowledge system via a combination of links and key words (index entries).

Examples: Libraries (remember them?), e-commerce sites, database-driven documentation.

Data Miners/Analysts

- Sift through legacy material, analyzing data for trends and linking material to help users to discover new paths to knowledge
- Audience: knowledge system users
- Writing style: modular
- Requires good general background in the subject area, excellent indexing ability

Technical Journalists

- Create news stories about technical subjects, for either print or electronic media
- Audience: generally less technical
- Writing style: modular, journalistic; follows the traditional “who, what, where, when, how, and why” model
- Requires good general background in the subject area, engaging writing style

Grants/Proposal Writers

- Develop new, and tailor existing, technical content for grant requests or proposals
- Audience: reviewers from academic and/or commercial institutions
- Writing style: formal; other (seemingly less relevant) criteria also apply here
- Requires great organization, editorial skills, patience with minute details

Some technical communicators
design,
develop,
position, and
disseminate

information that promotes the purchase of high-technology goods and services.

They can do this as:

- Technical Marketing Specialists
- Technical Advertising Copywriters
- “Web Designers”
 - Content developers
 - Web site architects
 - Graphic artists

“Sales-oriented” Technical Writers

- Develop promotional material (brochures, webzine blurbs, press releases, and possibly advertising copy) for technical goods and services
- Audience: Ask P.T. Barnum
- Writing style: Ranges from second person plural to MTV
- Good visual skills a huge plus

And What Makes You Think You Can Do It?

All technical communication jobs require a core set of skills and personality traits.

You may well have many of these skills and traits already.

Before we get into what life as a technical communicator *feels like*, let's do a skill and sanity check.

- Do you work or play with a computer?
- Do you have any visual design skills or training?
Can you demonstrate them?
- Do you have any *recent* programming skills?

... and, if you don't, are you willing to take courses to obtain those skills?

- Do you have strong written and verbal English skills?
(Can you demonstrate them?)
- Are you your own best editor?
- Are you your own worst critic?
- What word processing and graphics software do you use regularly?
Are you prepared to learn a new one next year? And another one, two years after that?
- What operating systems have you used?
(For medical or other technical: what related equipment are you familiar with?)
- What skills do you use in your current job, that you think you can generalize to a career in technical communication?
- What other “useless” skills do you have?

Other Things That Managers Look For

- A high level of organization
 - To get things out in good shape, and on time
 - To create documentation cleanly, so the next person can slide right into your footprints
- Persistence
Some managers call this “goal orientation”; it’s the ability to keep your eye on the ball during a project, in the face of delays, course changes and other setbacks
- Good interview skills
Because developers really *are* different
- Ability to lead, follow, or get out of the way
You’ll hear the term “team player” until it makes you want to scream
- People skills
The ability to elicit support, form alliances, motivate key technical contacts and reviewers, deal with deadline pressure
- Professionalism
Everything takes second place to the deadline. Can you deal with this calmly and with dignity, and produce high-quality work regardless?
A Comfort Zone that fits their company’s culture
It’s no crime to be an IBM kinda guy in an Oracle culture -- but you’ll be more successful, and happier, if you’re not

Foreshadowing Alert!

Remember the points we've just made about what kinds of applicable experience you already have, and what kinds of personal qualities managers are looking for.

We'll use this information again when it's time to talk about your skills inventory, and interview strategy.

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