

TECHNIQUES

STC

Topics in Technical Communication

Fall 2010

Inspirational

by Kayley Ostermann

The end of fall semester 2010 quickly approaches and so do project deadlines and final exams. All of us could use a boost of inspiration; a subtle reminder of why we work so hard to master the skills of a technical writer.

Recently, it was my good fortune meeting such an inspiration, Kristin Lisson. I interviewed Kristin on November 14, 2010 online with Skype. She graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato in 2003 with a B.S. in Technical Communication and minors in Computer Information Science and Computer Technology.

Choosing Technical Writing

Originally from Worthington, MN, Kristin discovered her love for English while in high school. This early interest sparked her enrollment in English 271, Technical Communication, a class taught by Dr. Roland Nord at Minnesota State Mankato.

Kristin credits Dr. Nord with inspiring her interest in technical communication as a career. She explains, "Once Dr. Nord helped me understand technical communication is about more than writing the label for a shampoo bottle, I was hooked." The mentoring she received from Dr. Nord as well as other Minnesota State Mankato professors prompted her choice of technical writing as a career.

Professional Background

As a junior at Minnesota State Mankato, Kristin completed her internship at James Tower, a printing company, in North Mankato. Eventually, this led to full time employment for 3 ½ years writing user manuals for online help. She eventually left James Tower to work with Speech Gear in Northfield, MN.

Speech Gear creates speech language software. Kristin was able to branch out and use other skill sets with this company. Some of her projects included email newsletters, marketing, online communication, print documentation, user manuals, and web design. She enjoyed the broad spectrum of work she was exposed to during this time of her career.

Currently, Kristin works with Sage Software, a Microsoft competitor which has business interests all over the world. Kristin currently calls Scottsdale, Arizona home and primarily works in the training department at Sage Software. Kristin trains online help desk employees who work for companies that purchase software created by Sage. She also trains the online help desk employees how to use the user manuals. In addition, Kristin also develops training manuals and videos.

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Interview of Edell Fiedler

*Public Information Specialist,
City of Mankato*

by Trisha Ewen



How did you get into technical writing/communication?

I've always enjoyed writing, editing and visual design. When I initially entered the technical communication program, I saw it was a good fit for my bachelor's degree.

What is your educational/professional background?

Bachelor of Science degree, double majors in Public Relations and News Editorial, minor in English; Creative Writing Master of Arts, English, Technical Communication.

Both degrees are from Minnesota State University, Mankato. I'm close to completion of a non-profit leadership certificate. I've worked in local government and for public schools. I've worked in the private sector and also in a non-profit organization. I've found that the best fit for me is local government and public schools. I truly enjoy working for the organization I work for. I did edit and publish a local magazine between jobs. The magazine is no longer in existence, but it was a great experience. I assigned stories, edited stories, and oversaw design.

Describe your job satisfaction.

Extremely satisfied.

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Anthony Wacholtz

*Senior Editor,
Capstone Press*

by Samuel Gibbs

I was given the great opportunity to interview Anthony Wacholtz, senior editor for Capstone. Wacholtz has always been a grammar fanatic. In high school Wacholtz developed an interest in the publishing field. He decided to earn his Bachelor of Science degree in Technical Communication from Minnesota State University Mankato after seeing the broad and diverse courses available within the Technical Communication program. "The editing technical publications course solidified that I wanted to be a professional editor after college," said Wacholtz.

After completing his undergraduate degree, Wacholtz was hired as an assistant editor with Capstone, a children's book publishing company located in Mankato, MN. He is now a senior editor and has been with the company for more than five years. Wacholtz is currently nearing completion of his Master's degree in Technical Communication.

Wacholtz says there are two aspects of his educational background that really helped him the most in his professional career, "First, the editing technical publications course was invaluable in preparing me for the level of editing in the business world." Wacholtz goes on to say, "Second, I learned the extremely important concept of networking. The technical communications department runs the MSU branch of the Society for Technical Communication (STC)." Wacholtz found out about his current job from a fellow STC member.

Wacholtz was surprised to discover

the diversity of tasks he was given as an editor for a children's book publishing company. Although he primarily works on editing middle school level books and specializes in sports, science, math, history, and biographies, he also works with authors, content experts, reading consultants, and other outside readers to ensure that the books are accurate, appropriate, and up to date. Wacholtz also works closely with other departments when creating each book. The editor, designer, and media researcher must meet to choose the best images for the design of the book.

The two most common software products Wacholtz uses at his job are Microsoft Word and Adobe InDesign. Microsoft Word is used at the manuscript stage. It allows Wacholtz to send different versions of the manuscript to the various consultants and use track changes to add comments to the author for revisions. Adobe InDesign is used to develop the book's layout with the help of the designer and media researcher.

When asked what the favorite part of his job was Wacholtz said, "I love the people I work with and the sense of cooperation and teamwork I get from completing great books as a team." Wacholtz finds it very satisfying to spend six months on a set of books and get to hold the finished product at the end.

Wacholtz had this advice for students wanting to pursue a career in technical communication, "Get involved. The best way to market yourself is to join relevant organizations, attend events, and meet people. Stay up to date on the trends within technical communication. Take a variety of classes and stay open to what area of the field you want to pursue." §

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The economic downturn has caused major changes in how Sage Software trains their customers. Until about two years ago, training was primarily done face to face. Sage's customers paid to have their employees flown to Scottsdale for training.

However, as companies started cutting costs, they stopped sending employees to Scottsdale for training. In order to sustain through the economic difficulties, Sage Software gradually transitioned to purely online training. As of today, Kristin and those in her department complete all training online.

When Kristin first worked at Sage Software, she worked at the office five days per week. Now, she works at the office two days per week and from home three days per week. She and her team of co-workers meet online remotely each day and all classroom training is completed remotely. Her team uses Google Docs and Skype most often for communication. Sometimes they use email, but find email cumbersome if it involves more than three to four emails for any given topic.

Assets and Pitfalls for Newcomers

The biggest assets a newcomer to the technical communication field can have are good writing skills and good understanding of technology. Kristin explains, "Being able to write clearly and keeping knowledgeable about latest technology is critical to a technical writer's success."

Accepting a job that is not really technical writing is the biggest pitfall for a newcomer. "The skill set learned by

the technical writer can be applied in many careers but may not be the best match for an individual. A newcomer needs to be aware of this when considering jobs or they may find themselves working in a field not suitable for their expectations," Kristin explains.

Daily Tasks

A typical day of work for Kristin involves the following tasks:

35% Email, Skype, Gooledocs

- Project status reports
- Project reminders

40% Developing Training Manuals

- Print documentation using Framemaker
- Video creation using Camtasia

20% Miscellaneous

- Project requests from other departments

Technical writers have a large skill set that is appreciated by others so it is common for Kristin and her team to help out other departments adding to the miscellaneous work completed during the day.

Drawbacks of technology

While there are many perks to online training, disadvantages also exist from lack of face to face contact. Kristin explained, "Not all learners effectively absorb information online so those learners typically take longer when learning this way. So the trainers need to be aware of these learners and incorporate other training methods to facilitate their learning."

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Interview of Edell Fiedler

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What are your daily tasks as a technical communicator?

Manage website content

Write news releases

Write articles

Oversee brochure design/publications

Oversee newsletter projects

Manage social networking tools

Develop communication plans

Event planning

Presentations

How do you describe your job(s) to others not in the technical communication field?

Technical communication is a big part of everyone's jobs even if not everyone realizes it. Technical communication includes so much of what people do on a daily basis: writing emails, memos, working on websites, social networking, brochures, putting together spec or bid sheets, etc. The better a person's technical communication skills, the more of an edge they have in the work place.

What do you believe the future is for technical communication?

I see technical communication continuing to evolve especially with the new technologies becoming available. It is a strong field and a good career path.

What do you foresee yourself doing in the next 5 years in this field? 10 years?

Working public relations for local government and public schools. I truly love my job. It changes every day and there is a lot to do. §

Interview with Tom Seely

Project Management Professional

by Anders Rydholm

When I approached Tom Seely, a Project Management Professional of a large consulting firm, to do an interview regarding the current trends of communication in his professional field of project management, he couldn't wait to start the conversation. Tom is a project management professional with an MBA in Business from MSU, Mankato and a Masters in computer science from the University of Minnesota. Tom has worked for some of Minnesota's top employers and says that his experience at companies like 3M, West Publishing, and Fingert has convinced him that technical communication savvy graduates are in high demand.

As a project manager, Tom is responsible for setting and managing deadlines, improving workflow, and leading technical operations across a wide spectrum of business endeavors. Tom encourages people to become certified PMPs by buying the PMBOK (Project Manager Book of Knowledge) and testing through the PMI.

I asked what assets he considers most beneficial in his coworkers and he told me he prefers and supports people on his team who are technical, analytical, and those who are able to think outside the box. As a project manager, Tom uses software programs like Microsoft Project, Project Server, Visio, Sharepoint, use cases, storyboards, as well as many others on a day to day basis.

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Gretchen Herrick

*Technical Writer,
Thiele Technologies*

by Kt Harrington

Gretchen began learning about Technical Communication at St. Mary's, where in 2004 she earned a B.A. in English Literature with an emphasis on writing design. She then began working on earning her graduate degree through MSU. When I asked why she wanted to go into Technical Communication in the first place, Gretchen replied that going into Technical Communication seemed to be the most practical choice at the time, and that it had a lot of job opportunities. Although she knew she could earn a living and still be doing a lot of writing, reading, and research as a technical writer, for Gretchen the best part was, "Always learning something new."

I was very interested in what her experience at MSU was like, and asked Gretchen what she thought was most useful or helpful to her career from what she learned at MSU. Gretchen answered with many wonderful things about MSU, beginning with her internship to the networking opportunities MSU offered. Gretchen said that the relationships she formed in classes really helped her get to know more people in the field, and she feels that she practiced a lot of practical applications during her time here.

I then wanted to know a little more about the people who really helped her at MSU. Gretchen said that the two most memorable people to her at MSU are Nancy MacKenzie and

Gretchen Perbix, each for different reasons. Nancy MacKenzie taught her a lot of theory about Technical Communication, which she found that interesting and helpful. Gretchen Perbix, on the other hand, taught a lot of history behind reading and writing. Gretchen found these parts equally useful and memorable, and uses them today in her technical writing position.

After Gretchen graduated from MSU in 2006, she went to work at a packaging company in Alexandria, MN. She found this job through MavJobs, and feels it was a real learning situation. While working in Alexandria she was able to learn the technical communication packaging field, including terms, structure, and format.

Once she had worked in Alexandria for a year and a half, Gretchen decided it was time to move on. She got a job working for a manufacturing company called Thiele Technologies located in the Twin Cities, where she has since been working on machine information manuals for packaging lines.

Gretchen enjoyed her experience at MSU, and was able to really grow in her time here, and has now gone on to be successful as a technical writer. She offers a few words of advice to Technical Communication students: "It is important for a Technical Writer to be proactive, willing to learn, and able to work with a variety of people." §



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In addition, Kristin's team sometimes receives feedback, from the people they train asynchronously, stating they prefer face to face training at Sage Software because their companies require them to train at the office so they get disrupted with phone calls and daily tasks associated with their jobs while trying to train.

Preparation

Kristin believes the education she received at Minnesota State Mankato and internship experience at James Tower adequately provided preparation necessary for working as a technical writer. "Education provides practical training and sets your mindset in preparation for field work. Theories such as writing for the audience and keeping the user first when creating documents are critical to the success a technical writer has in future jobs," she explained.

Advice

Finally, the biggest piece of advice

Kristin has for newcomers is "Don't be afraid to ask questions – even the really dumb ones. No matter what industry we all wind up in, it's our job to figure out how something works and explain it to someone else. During the writing process, take advantage of your Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to get answers rather than assume, guess, or ignore."

Inspiration and mentor

Kristin's uplifting spirit and enthusiasm about her work as a technical writer was inspirational. After finishing our interview, I felt renewed and excited to move forward in pursuit of my own career in technical writing. It was exciting to hear the contentment, passion, and pure joy she feels about her work as a technical writer.

A few years ago Dr. Nord inspired Kristin Lisson to pursue her career in technical writing. In turn, she took the opportunity to pass along that inspiration as she shared her experiences and knowledge about her work with me. Thank you, Kristin! §

Interview with Tom Seely

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He said that one of the best ways to get work done in the current industrial environment is to share and discuss project materials in online meeting rooms through programs like Adobe Connect and Sharepoint.

When I asked him how a person with a technical communication degree could benefit a company like his, he told me "As a project manager, I do a lot of technical communicating. SME's and people I supervise really benefit a lot from knowing how to write articulately, format tables and numbers, sort and organize information, and have skills in visual design, risk management, and computers." §

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Jonathan Carlson

Technical Writer

by Andrew Hebert

Technical writer Jonathan Carlson majored in Psychology and English - Creative Writing at MNSU. At one point he was required to take a Technical Communication course, in which he was assigned the task of writing a report about an on-campus MNSU department. That report ended up being more than a typical assignment, and became his first step towards becoming a technical writer.

For this report, Carlson interviewed staff working in the Student Health Center. This interview ended up completely changing what Carlson had planned to do after graduation. He'd been contemplating whether or not a job in Psychology would actually be ideal for him, and decided to seek guidance from the Technical Communication department at MNSU. This led to his decision to pursue a graduate degree in Technical Communication. Reflecting on his educational experience, Carlson describes how much he greatly values his education and the positive relationships he developed with the faculty. He credits the faculty with helping him feel "engaged and interested in Technical Communication during my entire graduate experience."

When asked about his professional background, Carlson responds: "I first started working for National Instruments (NI), an engineering company in Austin, Texas. My job as technical writer was to write and edit documentation on the software known as LabVIEW. LabVIEW is a virtual graphical interface used by scientists and engineers to create test, measurement and control systems...Documenta-

tion for LabVIEW included online documents, 'Getting Started' manuals for LabVIEW, and help files for LabVIEW." He praises N.I. for encouraging their technical writers to further their knowledge, and allowing them to perform their daily tasks in "precise and forward-thinking ways."

However, although he enjoyed the work environment at NI, he eventually lost interest in the day-to-day work and turned his focus towards a new career in desktop publishing. Carlson sees this as an example of the variety of positions that are possible for a technical writer: "What's great, however, is that I take my technical writing skills and apply them to my current career. Whether I edit documents during my desktop publishing work or perform coding on websites, I keep my education in technical communication relevant and working."

As for the professional outlook of the Technical Writing field, he remains optimistic, claiming, "Technical writing is essential to our working world..." and that technical writers even essentially constructed the framework behind computers; each of us have used a help book or document that taught us how to use a certain system or software. Carlson's concluding statement sums up the importance of Technical Communication: "If we continue to practice plain language to our best abilities, we will satisfy audiences and prove that Technical Communication is vital to our working world." §

Kevin Thompson
*Information Security Manager,
 Minnesota State University*

by Anthony Solyntjes

Kevin Thompson has been working with computers and technology equipment for more than 14 years. He joined the Navy immediately following high school and was put to work maintaining computer and radio equipment. After his enlistment ended, he continued to working for government contractor installing computer networking equipment on ships. For the last four years, he has worked as the Information Security Manager at Minnesota State University, Mankato. This position puts Thompson in a position reviewing systems and programs at the university and authoring technical communications documents when they are necessary.

This is a unique position that people in the Information Systems field may find themselves in. While they may spend years focusing on a specific discipline, they then may find themselves broadening their knowledge in order to understand systems that they may not have dealt with before. They may also find themselves authoring policy and technical documents out of necessity.

Thompson's position at MSU was created from necessity four years ago to show a proactive approach toward data security on campus. When he began working with the software developers and systems administrators, he noticed a culture change here opposed at the military. In the military, culture is very formal and rigid, and having a large body of policies makes sense. At MSU, it is "a small, nimble environment with lots of stakeholders and low formality," he stated. This

makes it easier for him to choose what type of policies to pursue.

"Some places have a belief that a rule is not a rule unless it has been codified into a policy. I disagree with that completely," he said.

By working in this environment, security policy that needs to be addressed can be, and frivolous guidelines that may not apply to the entire university can be avoided. That's not to say that certain seemingly minor issues should not be documented. Thankfully, there are many layers that feed down into MSU including policy from the Federal level, State of Minnesota, and MnSCU.

Another reason to not create a policy is because it may be completely unenforceable. "I am also a big believer that whatever policy you adopt should be followed to the letter and should reflect exactly what you want the outcome to be," Thompson said.

When he creates a policy draft, a year of revisions, committee meetings, and changes are likely to follow. The document review time is very important to the creation of a solid document. Meeting with subject matter experts and the people that will utilize the policy the most helps it become the best it can be. And when everyone is satisfied with the result, there is a much higher likelihood that the policy will be enforced and not disregarded. Some policies are viewed as a list that needs to exist but no one expects it to ever be enforced. There is no benefit in "creating an organization on paper that you would never create in real life," he said. If a policy is going to exist, it needs to be responsible and enforceable.

Thompson enjoys working at MSU

and the responsibilities he has securing and protecting the data here. Some days he is a one-man team and others he is a man working with a team. But every day, he gets to combine a strong technical background with technical communication. §