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TECHNIQUES

Technical Communication in the Digital Era

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Benefits of Hiring a Technical Writer

By Rachel Flood-Grubb

In today's economic environment, where companies are diligently watching their bottom line, many find it hard to justify the cost of hiring a technical writer. In fact, many managers believe that anyone on their staff could write technical documentation, so why would they hire someone new to do it? This article explores some of the many benefits of having a technical writer on staff.

Software developers, engineers, and subject matter experts (SMEs) have more knowledge in their subject area than anyone else. They are the natural first choice when it comes to developing documentation. Unfortunately, there are many reasons why they are not the best choice. Documentation written by SMEs is often suited for a peer audience, including complex information laced with jargon that is not easily understood by a non-technical audience.

Technical writers specialize in knowing their audience. After gathering detailed information from SMEs, they translate, organize and present information in a way that is easily understood by the audience. The audience may be a group of biologists who already understand biology, but need to know how a program can help them accomplish a task. Or the audience may be a college student learning to use a software program for the first time. Customized documentation increases the likelihood that the audience will accomplish their goals without needing technical support. This increases customer satisfaction while saving the company both time and money.

In order to create thorough documentation, technical writers conduct research including interviews and usability testing. By putting themselves in the shoes of their audience, they are often able to identify ways to streamline tasks, making the product easier to use and more efficient. Having technical writers with user interface expertise means product developers, engineers and SMEs are free to focus their time and efforts on product development. If usability tests reveal areas that don't function as they should, technical writers make recommendations for product enhancements allowing developers to make updates before the product is launched. This enhances product usability, reduces documentation and increases customer satisfaction adding value to the product and company name.

The need for technical documentation is not limited to the computer industry or software development. Online forum TechWhirl says "the practice of technical writing takes place in any field or industry where complex ideas, concepts, processes or procedures need to be communicated." The types of documentation deliverables are as diverse as the fields that use them.

Common forms of technical documentation include:

- Contracts
- Demonstrations
- How-to videos
- Policies
- Process flows
- Product packaging
- Proposals
- Release notes
- Web-based training
- Websites

Technical writers work alongside content managers, editors, graphic designers, and trainers in departments such as compliance, education, marketing, risk, research and development and sales. The benefits of having a technical writer on staff are not limited to one department. Their expertise may reduce the amount of time it takes to develop documents and may eliminate the need for other company positions.

Creating organized documentation that combines the use of text and graphics for maximum usability is a consistent goal for all deliverables. Technical writers are experts at using formatting, keywords and titles to optimize search results. Providing quick answers saves users valuable time. High-quality documentation reflects well on a company name. When documentation is professional and easy to use, the user will assume the company and their products are professional and easy to use. Higher customer satisfaction leads to higher sales. While it is difficult to quantify the dollar value a technical writer brings to a company, there are clear benefits to having one on staff. Cost reduction, error reduction, usability enhancements, increased customer satisfaction and increased visibility are all benefits of hiring a technical writer. A technical writer is an investment in a company. Much like any investment, the value may change from day to day, but over time will grow significantly. ■

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Evolution

By Jack Sandberg

I recognize my capability by paying attention to the progress I have made at various times in my life, and am making now at a very fast pace as a first year Technical Communication student. At one time I pounded away on a manual typewriter with several carbon sheets, trying to keep columns of bowling averages aligned and hoping to avoid misprints. Now I can use speech recognition to enter text into this paper (I wish I could think fast enough to just go ahead and dictate the rest of this article). How far I have come... in forty-five years. At one time I could not display my XML data on a web page. Now I can click and have DITA-formatted title, context, short description, and text for my concept topic appear in an instant. How far I have come... in 17 hours!

Over the years as a student, a teacher, and as a professional working with corporate documents, I tried to keep up in fits and starts, in small steps and big, with even the tail end of ever-improving technology. I will relate some encounters with personal computers, and add some reminiscences about old technology along the way.

In 1986 I was a teacher, and the Chemistry Department office transitioned from mimeographs to expensive Xerox copies for classroom handouts. Small college culture adopted new technology at a snail's pace. People had been walking on the moon for years, and I got a chalk chuck in my Christmas stocking. Then the Chemistry department purchased two Apple II units, and I eagerly eyed this new personal computing opportunity. But let me flash back and step through the years before I return to the Apples.

In the summer of 1969 I learned to program in BASIC via "Pillsbury Hookup" time sharing, which used a clackety teletype machine fitted with a punched tape dispenser—hard memory, but no visual interface. I remember touring the corporate computer facility, handling tiny ferrite-core memory loops, and being wowed by a giant magnetic drum that served as the random access memory for the company and the time sharers. I was a 15-year-old enthusiast, fanatical in my fairly significant ability to fathom this new technology, and primed for the electronic age.

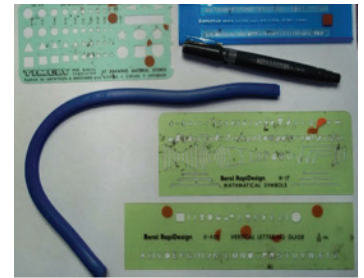
Yet, in my first year as a college student, what I brought to Physics class was my Pickett slide rule. Soon enough I got a hand-held programmable scientific calculator, which cost a small fortune. It did logarithms--a space age tool indeed. But instruction in college was by blackboard or overhead projection. Student compositions were typed, any mistakes being fixed with Wite-Out. There was no sign of personal computers in our neck of the woods. Making graphs by hand for homework was state of the art. The computer age was slow in coming in my world.

During my graduate school years, around 1980, I had a brush with a clean-



TippaS Manual circa 1974. Made in Holland.

cut looking IBM PC, which out of the blue landed on my supervisor's desk... and sat there. I never saw it being used, and had no idea how it worked. Educational technology of the early 1980's at a world class university consisted of chalkboard and overhead projector. My computer work was carried out on a teletype machine, the same technology from my high school years. For professional presentations, 35 mm projection slides made from drawn diagrams and typed copy were used. The best of them were reverse-contrast and colored using inks and a toothpick. My thesis? Typed on an electric typewriter that had a special cartridge with a plastic "once through" ribbon that simulated real type. Graphics were done by hand using lettering guides and lettering pens, or freehand. I did a nice resume with my fancy typewriter, landed a teaching job at a small college, and that's when the Apples appeared. Here is how my first encounter with a personal computer went.



Graphics tools circa 1980.

Approaching the new Apple computer, optimistically stepping forward to embrace this new personal computer magic, I picked up the manual and tried to get started. However, I found the manual for the Apple computer unhelpful. So I tried to get some help from a colleague who claimed to know how to proceed.

He handed me a black square card-like thing and said "you put this in and start it up". I put it in and started it up, heard some scraping sounds, and then it stopped. I took out the 5 ¼ disk. It had been erased. Embarrassed, I obtained a second start-up disk, and promptly erased it, too. At that point I could get no further immediate help, and decided it wasn't worth my time to keep at it. Besides, we had to get another start-up disk. I had experienced user *un*-friendliness. Later I warmed up to the Apple computer, but it sure was an unfortunate, disappointing first encounter.

When our kids were entering middle school the personal computer concept finally clicked with me. Our family bought a Tandy Model 1000 HX, unboxed it, plugged it in, and went to work with it. This personal computer was notable for its graphical user interface in hard memory, which gave users the pleasure of turning on the computer and immediately seeing something that invited them to get to work (instead of the dreaded flashing "C-prompt" which would only respond to formal computer speak). The software was MSDOS, which was the early operating system, MSBASIC for programming work, and the general purpose word processing program DeskMate. Substantial and well-written manuals made possible a smooth transition to functional user. This amazing technology became an important enabler of my work as a teacher and my kids' lives as students. "Pete Rose Pennant Fever", "Carmen SanDiego", the "Paint" application in Deskmate, and other fun and useful applications helped to cement our connections to the computer age. I tried my hand at several projects in computer generated art. I felt capable.



Tandy 1000 HX circa 1987.
Personal DeskMate GUI. Note high class dual floppy drives. 640 k RAM. No hard drive.

In later years I grew into habitual use of Word, Excel and PowerPoint, and other specialized tools, but only at an advanced amateur level. A significant part of my job involved creating and revising specification and instruction

documents. But getting things done in the trenches, being a step or two behind the state-of-the-art, is not where I want to be. Suddenly, and at a fast pace, I have entered into a transition. Daily and weekly I recognize and celebrate successes. And, in a larger sense, I optimistically and excitedly look forward as I grow from a Technical Writer in practice to a true Technical Communicator in the digital age. ■

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User Experience on the Web

By Lindsey Tollefson

In the digital era, we want to find information as quickly and easily as possible. We expect to be able to use technology with ease.

As information designers in the digital era, it is our duty to create a smooth and intuitive user experience—and perhaps even take it a step further to create a truly enjoyable one.

Doing so is no easy task, and while we always strive for perfection, there is no black and white answer to what makes a website “good” or “bad”. Our best strategy is to start with what we know about human psychology and the way people think, and begin to apply it to our designs as a starting point. Then we need to test our designs, revise, and repeat.

The most important part of a website user-experience is to find the information one is looking for quickly and easily. In order accomplish this task the technical communicator needs to consider many aspects of communication and information organization.

Anticipate your site visitor’s needs and questions

When doing so, consider your target audience and why they are visiting your website. What is it your audience wants to know?

To help get started, think about the questions you receive most often. You may have to talk with customer service or whomever fields phone calls to get the answer to this. Make sure the answers to these questions are easy to find.

Write your key messages

When doing so, ask yourself what differentiates you from your competitors. Also write down your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Try to keep messages short and clear, and communicate how your offering will benefit your audience.

Determine what pages and information should be included on the website, and write user friendly content. The information your audience will be seeking should be prominent.

To make information easy to skim quickly, write information in short paragraphs or lists, and use a lot of headings. Try not to have more than one complete list or more than two short paragraphs under each heading. If necessary, use several levels of headings. It’s better to have a lot of headings with several layers than have too few headings. This will help with usability because it will make your content easy to skim and improve your search engine optimization, making it easier for site visitors to find you.

Organize your content in an intuitive way

Keep your navigation as simple as possible. Try to keep top-level navigation items to around seven, plus or minus one or two. This will keep the navigational items manageable, so that site visitors are more likely to remember where they found specific information on your website.

Organize content from general to specific, and don't worry too much about how many clicks it takes to find something. Write clear descriptors for links, which will create a strong information scent. Studies have shown that site visitors get discouraged when the path to the information they need is not clear, and the number of clicks it takes to find information is not a major concern to website users as long as they feel like they are getting closer to their goals with every click (*Gocza & Kollin, Porter, Spool*).

Consider your defaults

People tend to go with defaults more often than not. You can nudge them to make certain choices based on the defaults you set (*Thaler & Sunstein*). For example, if you have a donation page, what is the default donation amount? Is it something that is good for your organization, or is it something that encourages a website visitor to donate?

What is the default font size for your website? Is it large enough to be easily read by your whole audience?

Consider your target audience's likely preference, and try not to stand in their way of reaching their goal. Do you annoy your site visitors with video and audio that plays automatically, interrupting whatever they might have going in the background? Do you interrupt your end user with pop-up ads when they visit your site?

Usability test

The only way to know if end users can find the information they need is to conduct usability studies. Once you've identified issues that need to be improved, develop and implement solutions. Then, do another usability test to see if the changes improved the user experience.

Conclusion

By following these steps when considering your website content and information architecture, you will create a website that communicates the right messages to your audiences, meets your needs, and meets the needs of your website visitors. When you achieve a website that meets or exceeds your website visitors' expectations, you have successfully created a positive user experience. The only way to see if you are achieving the goal of a positive user experience is to do continuous usability testing. Assess aspects of your website user experience, and use your findings to make recommendations for ways in which to improve it. ■

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Technical Information in Digital Communities: Consumer Testing and Reviews

By Dustin Patt

Technical communication in the digital age has enabled a large audience to access and actively participate in the sharing of technical information. Much of this technical information can be found in the evaluation of consumer products. Online digital communities regularly participate in fact-sharing, product evaluation, and troubleshooting. Through these online communities, it is easier than ever for a consumer to research a product before making a purchase. However, not all products are created equal and certain products require more in-depth evaluation. Users of an online forum scrutinize a manufacturer's claimed specifications by measuring and testing performance numbers, all for the purpose of sharing the information rather than making a profit.

In the past, the technical information provided by companies about their products could only be relayed to the consumer through advertisements, reviews from professional publications, or through hearsay or secondhand knowledge. The most common example of this is probably the automobile. A vehicle manufacturer often advertises several different specifications, including gas mileage. Experienced consumers often know that a manufacturer's gas mileage claims can be exaggerated and differ from real-world experience. Sometimes, there might be a professional publication available featuring an expert reviewer putting that vehicle through a series of tests and thoroughly measuring the manufacturer's claims.

While professional reviews are certainly valuable, an average consumer would have limited opportunities to access this review because of limited access to print magazines, newspapers, or television shows. Reviews from past issues or older shows might be even more difficult to come by. When these reviews can be accessed, a consumer might find a professional publication is only able to review a limited number of the newest and best products, and not able to provide the answers a consumer is seeking. There is also a possibility that reviews from professional sources could be affected by outside influences, such as advertisers.

The prevalence of online digital communities and information has made amateur user reviews more numerous and easier than ever to access. Amateur reviewers vary in knowledge, experience, and expertise, ranging from weekend hobbyists and enthusiasts, all the way to engineers, scientists, or professionals with industry experience. Regardless of their level of expertise, they readily post their reviews, impressions, and measurements for free and where anyone can access them, usually on online forums or

through video-sharing software such as YouTube. This information can then be easily found, sometimes years later.

Since amateur reviewers differ widely in their expertise and technical skills, the information in the reviews varies widely as well. Sometimes, it's just the reviewer's subjective impression of a product, commenting on how it "feels" or how it looks. Other times, more experienced reviewers subject a product to a much more rigorous and objective evaluation, measuring and testing the product multiple times using professional equipment and offering concrete performance numbers.

To give an example, communities dedicated to archery and bowhunting are known for providing a large number of amateur user reviews. The nature of archery in particular lends itself to these kinds of reviews. Archery can require a lot of equipment, which can come in many variations which can all have an effect on overall performance. In addition, manufacturers of archery equipment advertise performance numbers that often don't match up to real-world use. Manufacturers of hunting bows often advertise a number of characteristics of their bows, including the speed, quietness, smooth draw, and lack of vibration after a shot. Of course, most manufacturers advertise their bows as the fastest, quietest, and easiest-drawing bow of all-time. It's the combination of these factors that lead many consumers to online communities, such as *Archery Talk Forums* and *Bowhunting.com*, looking for answers.

Amateur user reviews scrutinize these claims in a number of ways. Sometimes, the information can be found in quick write-ups or lengthy, detailed reviews that include pictures, videos, and a number of tests and measurements. Professional instruments are used to measure speed, quietness, and vibration, and many bows are often compared with one another. Other times, a user can make a post seeking specific information. Other users respond if they can provide the information. When seeking information about the speed of a bow, users will respond with their chronographed speed and details about how their bow is set up including draw length and weight, arrow weight, and rest. With the amount of information available, consumers are able to make educated purchases based on the experiences and advice of many other consumers.

This is just a small example of many such communities in existence. With the large selection of consumer products available, it's more important than ever to have amateur reviews that can provide detailed analysis and information with a wide audience. Large and dedicated communities pride themselves in the quality of their reviews and in helping others. It's because of individuals willing to sacrifice time, energy, and sometimes even their own money, that consumers can now make decisions on purchases using the shared knowledge and experience of an online community. ■

Teaching with Technology

By Sara Koktan

An interview with Dr. Gretchen Perbix

Dr. Gretchen Perbix has taught Technical Communication at Minnesota State University, Mankato for 10 years. She received her undergraduate degree from Drake University in Iowa and her master's and doctorate from the University of Minnesota. *Techniques* interviewed her via Skype about the changing practices in teaching due to advancing technology.

Interview

As a business analyst, you worked on web-based applications and usability. What inspired you to teach technical communications?

I loved school. If you're a professor, you get to be involved in school all the time.

How has technology changed since you began teaching?

When I started teaching in the program, I don't think I taught any courses online, and now I teach almost all my courses online...the entire classroom has changed. It gives a lot of people opportunities to pursue education they may not otherwise have. My first foray into online education was as an undergraduate. I wrote a help module for students who were going to be doing something for online learning. That was back in 1999.

How has the advent of online classrooms changed your teaching practice?

I don't even teach much in a face-to-face classroom anymore. One out of six classes for me ends up being face-to-face. In a face-to-face class, I'll give students an exercise, walk around, and help them. I try to emphasize the social presence more in the asynchronous classes. I've had the opportunity to play around with a lot of things. Emphasizing some of those moves that contribute to social presence seem to have a positive influence on the class.

Many other professors argue that online courses are a business scam to get money from students without wasting resources on classrooms and teachers. How do you address this?

There's been a lot of research done on that, and the findings indicate that students who don't participate in the classroom will participate online. We're finding out that online discussions tend to be better quality. Ten years ago, it was about not selling students short in the online environment. We know that education face-to-face works. How can we know that it's as good online? That's not a question anymore.

What tactics do you use to teach online courses?

We don't have a lot of canned modules because we use the synchronous [live streaming] classes. If there's a place we've had influence, it's in the synchronous component. [Usually in other technical communications programs] it's asynchronous. I've been saying for a long time that when we teach online, we shouldn't try to replicate the face-to-face experience. When we teach online, that setting is better suited to different activities. If we're trying to make online classes the same as offline classes, then we're probably missing the point, and we're not using the strengths of the media that are available to us.

You're retiring at the end of the year to focus on your orchard business and your young children. Will you miss teaching?

Yeah, but I wouldn't be surprised if I come back to it. ■

This has been edited and condensed from its original version.

On Technical Communication in the New Millennium

By Anders Rydholm

Think about *The New York Times* for a moment. They are facing crippling losses in subscription revenue. The reason is a shift from print to digital media as the main mode of delivering and reading the news. There are three things to consider. First, The Times produces excellent content and is therefore well-prepared to capitalize on a digital publishing boom. Second, they are heavily invested in print and a commitment to digital publishing ultimately comes at a cost to the success of print. Third, the digital publishing market is flooded with new content as a reaction to free publishing on the internet. This means the need for skilled desktop publishers, writers, and editors. All of these factors lead to a difficult position for the company and an opportunity for skilled communicators. The situation is actually the result of a deeper 21st century phenomenon. The root of the problem, the Burkean aspect, is the need to ease a crucial transition, create a sustainable long-term strategy, and recover from certain failure by all means necessary.

Technical practitioners should keep this anecdote in mind as they think forward about their careers. They should anticipate a technologically demanding future in any occupation. ITS for instance is experiencing increasing demand for software, web, and mobile app development that will require technical communication expertise. Computer software skills and an understanding of software development will be vital to having a competitive edge in a technologically demanding world. Knowledge of web development and computer programming code (including for mobile devices) is highly recommended by hiring managers—meaning a Technical Communication degree will pair well with Information Technology for someone choosing a minor, double major, or other form of continuing education.

Take my story for instance. I earned a BS technical communication in 2012. I worked at a company that printed books for two years and went back to school for a pending MA in the same. My new year's resolution for 2014 was to learn how to read and write HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language). I was in luck and able to find a helpful open educational resource. The moment of salvation for me was the day I found Codecademy. Codecademy is a free, online training resource for HTML, CSS, PHP, JavaScript, Python, Ruby, and JQuery. In less than twenty-four hours I created my own website. I supplemented those fundamental skills with the detailed and exhaustive set of coding instructions and commands found on W3Schools. W3Schools is also an excellent resource for database languages like SQL and XML. I took the information I learned there and made the move from Folding Machine Operator to a stipend Webmaster position for my University with full tuition remission. I've never been happier. In large part I owe the technical skills I learned online for allowing me to go back to school, because my assistantship

pays my tuition. Completing my graduate degree is opening up a world of opportunities I never had the money to afford before.

My best advice to technical communicators is to love new technology. I would say if you don't love technology, seriously consider getting out. There are no more excuses for technical professionals to resist digital innovations. It should be apparent just considering the prospects for digital-savvy professionals and the access to open educational resources online. Equally important are the traits of intrinsic motivation, volition, and self-determination. These qualities are greater indicators of potential than any rote memorization of software functions. When tested by digital problems, I've found that it takes resourcefulness alone to be worthy of the challenge. When in doubt, find the knowledge to solve the problem and claim it by all means necessary. Beg, steal, or borrow a computer. Get access to expert advice or premium content if you have too. I am convinced that a sustainable future in our profession depends on confidence, competence, and commitment. We can all expect these will be called upon. But most of all, excitement about revolutionary technology and game-changing innovations can unite technical communicators as a community and improve the techniques we use to get work done for the better. ■

#Ghostfriends #Ghosttime

By Michael Torres

So many to get back to, to ask the well-being of.
I'm late again, this time for dinner at my own apartment.
If I cut through the campus lawn
to the parking lot: that's three minutes
saved, maybe...

Miguel in Northern Cali, tells me it's good to hear from me,
though it's only a text message.

So many people that don't think I think
about them as often as I do.

Danny, youngest of the guys from back home,
sends me a picture as I run across the street.
Danny, with an ultrasound picture of his girlfriend's stomach.
Three months he tells me. Last I heard, he wanted to
take it slow.

Am I the last one to know, I wonder?

Everything in California is moving without me
so I am always late
by two time zones.
That's two thousand miles of radio play
from Minnesota to California, listening to Spanish
go to static to Country, endless twang
and I think it was Miles Davis that said:
it's the notes you don't play,
(those silences between the music)
that make the music,
and so then maybe
this distance, this space between me
and everything I know
will make music.

At my apartment I crunch gravel, park the truck,
get out, get a phone call:
Jesse back home with his 21 year old girlfriend
or maybe ex now
because she wants to go out.

"But I let you go out with your girls," is what he tells me
he tells her and that she always says,
"but it's not the same thing."
and I know what she really means

but I just listen to him go on.

“I will be the best thing she’s lost,” he tells me.

I get out of my truck, shoulder backpack, say,
 “Take it slow,”
 same thing I told Danny,
 and when I open my apartment door
 my girl is chopping bell peppers and tomatoes,
 giving the spaghetti some life.

I walk in, wave, blow kiss, Jesse says, “huh.”
 I tell him, “let her do her thing.”
 He tells me he wants a girl that’ll give him a foot massage
 after nine hours on the job. I’m glad
 he can’t see me
 roll my eyes.

When the spaghetti steams
 from the plates my girl has served,
 I tell Jesse I can call him back if he wants.
 He tells me not to worry &
 thanks me for listening,
 I say, “Coo.”
 And before we hang up
 he tells me, “Just don’t tell anybody.”
 and I wonder who
 in Mankato
 would even know
 what I’m talking about.

Anyway, I say, “Sure,”
 because his sadness
 makes me happy,
 because I know
 out of two-thousand miles
 and ten odd years, he’s still there
 and so am I
 and isn’t that what friends are for,
 to make the other feel better,
 give some perspective?

I click, drop the phone
 and when me and my girl sit on the couch,
 warm plates on our laps,
 I sit close but leave enough space
 between us so we don’t knock elbows
 clinking plates with our forks. ■

HTML Poem

By Heidi Neibert

```
<!DOCTYPE html>
<html>
  <head>
    <title> HTML Poem </title>
  </head>
  <body>
    <h2> HTML POEM </h2>
    <h4> By Heidi Neibert </h4>
    <h3>When I Started</h3>
    <p>Everything was strange and new. <br>
      I was shocked and frightened, too. <br>
      Could I learn this funky code? <br>
      Would my browser finely load? </p>
    <hr>
    <h3>As I Practiced</h3>
    <p>My code displayed beautifully. <br>
      No more worries haunted me. <br>
      Triumphs and mistakes were made. <br>
      But the oopses seemed to fade.</p>
    <hr>
    <h3>What I'd Become</h3>
    <p> No more did I sense the fear, <br>
      that defeat and shame were near. <br>
      Confidence hugged me tighter. <br>
      I'd become a tech writer! </p>
    <hr>
  </body>
</html> ■
```

HTML POEM

By Heidi Neibert

When I Started

Everything was strange and new.
I was shocked and frightened, too.
Could I learn this funky code?
Would my browser finely load?

As I Practiced

My code displayed beautifully.
No more worries haunted me.
Triumphs and mistakes were made.
But the oopses seemed to fade.

What I'd Become

No more did I sense the fear,
that defeat and shame were near.
Confidence hugged me tighter.
I'd become a tech writer!

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