

TECHNIQUES

TOPICS IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION



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WHO WE ARE



TECHNIQUES is a collaboration between the Minnesota State University, Mankato Chapter for the Society for Technical Communication and ENG 577.

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We are wrapping up another semester and putting the finishing touches on final projects and papers. It seems only fitting that the Spring 2013 issue of *Techniques* looks at what motivates someone to enter a technical communication program, and Fer O'Neil gives us plenty of reasons to hang in there along with him.

After graduation, what can we expect? We have an interview with Arrika Brouwer, based on a presentation at a recent student chapter meeting of STC. Jonathan Chandler, from the Atlanta STC Chapter, shares information about his first

five years as a technical communicator. Yvonne Weiling Tok brings us another interview from Alisha Sauer, a professional technical writer, currently working in the field.

Like many of us, if you are continuing in the program, you will want to read the article on what a membership in STC can do for you. Don't forget to read the letter of greeting from our new STC Chapter President, John Maxwell. And, for those of us who still have papers to write and want to see a really good one, Sarah FitzSimmons brings us an extraordinary piece of

research in her article on PETA. Jon Negrelli is not only a fellow student, but he teaches technical communication at Cleveland State. He shares some interesting information in his article on the "Use of Website Forms to Teach Document Structure."

For those of you who are graduating, we wish you happy trails! For those who are continuing the journey, we'll be seeing you around the virtual campus. If you are taking classes this summer, we might run into each other in class (virtual wave to you). Otherwise, have a happy, safe summer!

Reflections on Finishing a Technical Graduate Program

By Fer O'Neil

As I reach the end of my time at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I can look back and say that I made the right choice to pursue the Master of Arts, Technical Communication (MATC) degree.

Before my penultimate semester in the program, I pondered about whether the graduate technical communication program I chose was the correct option for me. Once again, I want to take some time to reflect on

the choices I made, the experiences I've gained, and what I've learned along the way as I finish my thesis and complete the program.

First, completing the MATC program as a 100% online learner helped me to gain a competence and understanding of digitally-mediated discourse. Online learning environments emphasize digital literacy and written discourse more than traditional learning environments, which has

helped me as a working technical writer and as a technical communication student.

For example, in International Technical Writing (ENG 674), student-led teams conducted primary research on online learning and each team wrote a research paper on best practices for online learning and collaboration.

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TECHNIQUES

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Reflections

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Working across multiple time zones with a diverse and international group of students who held different perspectives on how to approach the project, I learned how to navigate technological limitations. This is just one of many examples of what I learned, and gained, from the program.

Immediate Impact

Ultimately, studying in the MATC program while simultaneously working full time as a technical writer has allowed me to immediately apply lessons and academic theories to my everyday work. Every theory and every assignment creates an opportunity to apply that knowledge in the workplace. If you approach each course from the perspective of how it can strengthen your professional development or be applied to your work, you find opportunities with every assignment to do so.

For example, I always looked for ways to “double dip,” as I called it - opportunities to use the time and effort I put into a course assignment or project toward a workplace task. Approaching courses, assignments, and projects in this way motivated me to work harder and to do a better job because I knew that the extra effort would mean that I could apply what I learned directly to a project at my workplace. For instance, in the User Experience (ENG 674) course, I completed a usability study of the MnOnline website where I learned about usability research, creating personas, and writing a quantitative report. I was able to share this knowledge with my workplace by offering insights on our own web pages.

Master of Arts is Synonymous with “Adaptable”

One of the strengths of an MA degree, a degree that is based on the humanistic and liberal arts tradition, and of the MATC in particular, is the flexibility that it offers. While the required core of the program provides an overview of the foundations of the humanistic technical communicator—namely, editing, writing for a digital medium, research methods and theory, and rhetorical theory—the other half of the program can be customized to focus on a particular area of technical communication that interests you.

“One of the tremendous benefits of synchronous courses in the MATC is the ability to connect with other students.”

For me, because I was already working as a technical writer, I decided to take more rhetorical theory courses, but I also selected some of the “practical” courses to learn about current methods and trends in the field. The breadth of offered courses, most of which are

under the general “Topics in Technical Communication” title, is ideal for both the prospective and current technical communicator.

For example, the Social Media (ENG 572) course I took during Summer 2011 gave me the time and opportunity to recognize how a technical communicator could contribute to a social media strategy. Additionally, studying the theory that underlies practical application helped me to begin constructing a social media persona that allowed me to connect with others in the field in a meaningful and valuable way.

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Reflections

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Networking

I can't say enough about how important networking is—both within the program with other students and faculty and with others in the technical communication field. One of the tremendous benefits of synchronous courses in the MATC is the ability to connect with other students. I have personally seen the results of this connection when a student and full-time technical writer shared a job opening with my class. A student in that class applied and subsequently was hired for the job.

Society of Technical Communication

As an online learner residing in California, I attended my local Society of Technical Communication (STC) chapter meetings; however, I did virtually attend several STC Mankato Student Chapter meetings and if I were a student only, I would have been very involved in the student chapter. The networking opportunities that the STC affords are foremost to any prospective or current technical writer.

How involved you want to be will depend on what your goals are: do you want to learn new methods and use of technologies? Do you want to share information with others at conferences? You can only take from the field what you put in and if you want to present at conferences or be privy to industry job opportunities, you have to make an effort to “join” the industry. You can't remain an outsider and expect to benefit.

For example, I began attending STC meetings with the hope to meet and learn from established members of the technical communication industry. Additionally, I had a desire to present at conferences and I knew that the advice and guidance of STC members would help me toward this goal. I can say that the guidance I received prepared me to submit a proposal for and ultimately be chosen to present at the STC Summit 2011. This opportunity opened new presenting offers that have allowed me to present at conferences all across the United States over the course of my time in the MATC program. I attribute this to my membership in the STC.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the other place where networking has been vital for me to join the conversation with others in the industry. I

can't say enough about the power of this social media site. There is such a wealth of information to help any level of technical writer professionally. Of course, as I've mentioned previously, you need to join the groups and participate to receive the most from the experience. There are two LinkedIn groups that I think are essential for any technical writer to be a member of and to regularly engage with: [Society for Technical Communication](#) and [Technical Writer Forum](#).

Training, Working, Teaching...

Because I was working full time as a technical writer while in the MATC program, I didn't need to do an internship. From what I've seen, the graduate school and professors send frequent notices of internship opportunities. I also think that the new [Minnesota State University, Mankato -- Technical Communication Graduate Program](#) LinkedIn group will be a valuable resource for students and prospective technical writers to share opportunities such as available internships.

Another opportunity that is available to graduates of the MATC program is the ability to teach at the college level. Whether you have a goal of teaching or not, the degree affords you the prospect by qualifying you for such a position. However, you need to be flexible and realize that there are many qualified people who seek the same goal of teaching at the college level and that receiving the MATC degree qualifies you for a position, but does not guarantee it.

Furthermore, completing Mankato's MATC degree as an online learner may be more beneficial than the traditional classroom degree because of the increased interest and expertise in learning and teaching online. Completing a humanities-based degree also allows you to teach composition courses as well as technical communication—those with credentials in literature only or the sciences have fewer claims to teach composition or technical communication courses. This flexibility provides an MATC graduate much greater opportunity for teaching positions.

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The “Practice” versus “Theory” Debate

One of the foremost areas of discussion and contention in the field is what balance of theory and practical skills should be taught in a technical communication program. I don't intend to continue that debate here, but it is important to recognize how different people view the intentions of a technical communication degree. Ultimately, the program and courses that are chosen will supplement, complement, or add to the skills and knowledge that you seek to attain. Personally, I don't agree with the prevailing attitude that rhetoric and theory studies leads to continued study (academia) whereas the more technical (i.e., practical skills) programs are better suited to careers “in industry.”

For example, the courses and skills that a prospective technical communicator needs will be different from a current technical writer who wants to supplement their practical knowledge with theoretical foundations. So while there is an understandable demand to offer “practical” courses that teach Software A or Program X, because of the nature of our field—one that is rapidly changing because of technology—instead, students should aim to learn to be technologically competent (see Tolley and Kim 2004).

For example, instead of taking an entire course on a software that may not, and probably will not, be used at a future job, understanding the concepts of the software's use and function as a tool will serve a prospective technical writer better. Research has shown that employers value a technical writer's ability to learn new software over a pre-existing expertise with one application. This reassures an employer that changes in technology or the market won't affect the technical writer's ability to adapt to these changes (see Rainey, Turner, and Dayton 2005; Lanier 2009; Whiteside 2003; and for the other side of the argument, Coon and Scanlon 1997).

Technical Communication is a Multidisciplinary Field

For those reading this, you most likely already chose to

begin the MATC program. For those reading this who are debating whether an MATC degree is right for them, I hope that some of my experiences will help them to decide if the opportunities that it offers are worth the time, effort, and money.

If I were to as succinctly state what an MATC offers, I would say that it opens a lot of doors, but most times you can't choose which doors will open—these will be a result of a combination of your existing skills, your network, location, goals, and personal ambition.

For example, a lesson I have learned is that one need not have a specific degree in technical communication to be a technical communicator. From my understanding, having any educational background combined with a high digital literacy (and of course having the eponymous “writing” literacy) is all the education that is ‘required’ to become a technical communicator. There is too much to learn for the varied jobs and tasks that a technical communicator could potentially do. Since working as a technical writer, I have been offered a position as a copywriter; I have worked on developing the social media strategy for a company; I have written press releases; and I have performed myriad other assignments that blur traditional departmental boundaries.

“I think that the Mankato MATC program is on the vanguard of technical communication graduate programs and this is due to the time, experience, and effort of its instructors.”

Ultimately, the success of an MATC student will depend on the choices they make, their ambition for reaching the goals they have set for themselves. What will help you accomplish this is having a strong affinity for technology, a predisposition toward the use of emerging technologies, and an existing penchant for language and writing.

Thank you Minnesota State University, Mankato

I'm still employed as a technical writer so I can assume that the MATC program (at the least) didn't set me back. As I've attempted to elucidate in this post is quite the contrary—I believe that the MATC program is a door to vast opportunities; opportunities that would not exist without it.

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The Road to a Technical Writing Career

By Katrina Reed

For the last 10 years, Arricka Brouwer has worked as a technical communicator, holding positions at large corporations such as Lowe's and Pfizer. With experience directing copy editors and working with translators to localize documentation, she has a demonstrated ability to develop process and instructional documentation.

On February 12, 2013, Arricka met with the MNSU Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication to talk about her experiences in the world of technical communication and how she got to where she is now.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

I went to school at Iowa State University, and I have technical writing experience all the way from being an intern, to a permanent employee, and now currently as a contractor. Currently, I am a contractor at Lowe's corporate headquarters in Morrisville, North Carolina. I'm in their IT department. [There are] about 3,000 people in their IT department; a mixture of permanent and contract employees, so it's probably, I think, it's the largest employer that I've worked for.

Q: How did you get into the field of technical communication?

I got into technical writing because I was at University halfway through my bachelor's program when they

developed the rhetoric and professional communication program, and it really married my love of learning with my writing ability. So I've been very happy with it as a profession; I think it's very versatile. You can grow it a number of different ways depending on your interests and specifically, I'm currently at Lowe's because as their IT department is so large, it really joins a lot of my past experience, so I've really enjoyed it thus far.

Q: How has technical communication changed since you first entered the field?

I started in technical writing in the mid-90s, and [since] that time, there [have] been a lot of changes, first and foremost the awareness of technical writing as a profession. When I started out, there were a lot of people who really didn't understand what I did because prior to that timeframe, a lot of people just kind of moved into writing down what people did, or writing down what the software did; it wasn't a formalized position. Now, most everybody's heard of technical writing. In fact, at one point in time there was a sitcom that featured a technical writer. I never saw it but I did hear about it. The technology boom really provided a lot of jobs in the mid-90s and when I was starting out and kind of getting my foot in the door.

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Society for Technical Communication Student Chapter: What Does It Mean To Me?

By Gere Hirsch

As a technical communication student, you are already busy with course requirements, personal responsibilities and budget concerns. Why join the Society for Technical Communication? To help you make that decision, I talked to our current advisers, Dr. Lee Tesdell and Dr. Jennifer Veltsos, and scoured the STC website in order to identify the advantages and challenges of student membership in STC.

Benefits

Membership in STC gives immediate access to a variety of

resources including:

The Local Chapter. The local chapter provides opportunities for leadership in the form of officer positions and networking opportunities with fellow student, faculty and professional STC members. Students can also participate with students at other colleges and universities. Activities and projects are available within a chapter, such as participation in the Academic SIG, which pairs a professional mentor with a student to work on projects creating sections of the Body of Knowledge.

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Society for Technical Communication

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Students can also participate in the Academic SIG Student Poster Competition. Membership provides opportunities for recognition at the individual, academic, and community level:

- Distinguished Service Award for Students (DSAS);
- Distinguished SIG Service Award (DSSA);
- Sigma Tau Chi (STX), which recognizes students in baccalaureate or graduate programs;
- Alpha Sigma (AS), which recognizes students in two-year or certificate programs;
- Community Achievement Award;
- Community Pacesetter Award.

Publications. Membership in STC gives access to several publications:

- **Intercom** – The magazine for Technical Communication.
- **Technical Communication** – A peer-reviewed journal.
- **STC's Notebook Blog** – An electronic publication.
- **TechComm Today** – An ePub.

Training. Guest speakers at STC meetings provide opportunities for students to hear about the latest happenings in the professional world. In addition, each month STC offers a series of live and recorded webinars, seminars, and online conferences on topics of interest. Students get these for a reduced rate. Currently, there are over 70 free, on-demand, archived seminars available for members.

Annual Summit Conference. An annual conference gathers technical communicators from a wide span of areas and fields together in one spot for various break-out sessions, panel discussions, and opportunities to mingle and meet. Student members can apply to volunteer to work the Summit and have the conference fee waived. In addition, each community receives one free registration to the Summit. The Summit Conference this year is being held in Atlanta from 5-8 May.

Additional Benefits. Student membership includes a student chapter, a geographic chapter, and a SIG (Special Interest Group), which offers an opportunity to network with specialized areas of the profession. The STC website provides access to a jobs database and discussion groups and gives the opportunity to post resumes and interact with professionals. The online store sells a variety of resources for professional use and learning tools. In addition, certification options are available.

Challenges

No one said it was easy to keep a chapter together. In a higher education setting, with students constantly moving through the program and onto their professional life, maintaining a stable organization is a challenge. Turnover is constant and membership changes on a yearly basis. To keep things running requires the coordinated efforts of dedicated faculty advisors and interested students. The student chapter is only as good as the effort

that is put into it.

The MNSU Student STC Chapter invites you to join us in making this chapter the best yet. In coming semesters, pass the word onto fellow students. Help recruit others into the chapter. Silence is the best way to kill a chapter. Talking about it and inviting people to join is how we keep it going.

Meeting Details

The Chapter meets once a month. Details are posted on the Technical Communication home page as well as in D2L under Technical Communication majors.

For more information see the listing of officers, located on the sidebar of the latest Techniques issue, or contact our academic advisors: Dr. Lee Tesdell or Dr. Jennifer Veltsos.

Resources

Baehr, Craig, and Henschel, Sally. "STC Student Membership: Challenges, Opportunities, and Benefits." *Intercom* January (2013): 31-33. Accessed February 18, 2013. ISSN: 0164-6206.

<http://www.stc.org>

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Gere Hirsch is an online graduate student from the hot and sunny state of Georgia. When not in school or herding cats, husband, and daughter, she can be found at the local VA hospital writing policies and procedures. In her spare time...wait, what spare time?!



The Road to a Technical Writing Career

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Now, as far as the available jobs, I'm sure if anyone of you have monitored monster.com or glassdoor.com or some of those other jobs sites, you'll probably notice there's quite a few short-term contracts available. In my opinion, the permanent positions are kind of at a comparable level to where they were at the beginning of my career. Compensation wise, the rates were much higher, at least for contracts, earlier in the 90s and in the early 2000s, and now the compensation is still nice for the web content development or in very specialized fields that require security clearance, but I think in other areas like policies and procedures, it hasn't kept up completely with the cost of living and inflation. That's my personal opinion; that's not based on research. I've lived in the Midwest, in the northeast, and down south, and so that's where I'm drawing my conclusions; from moving quite a bit.

Q: What skills should technical communicators have?

You can't prepare for everything, but you can prepare a foundation of skills to build upon, and you're already doing that currently in your education. So, because you can't be an expert in every tool, what you do want to do is number one, have a conversational knowledge of different delivery methods. So what I mean by that is you never know what's

going to come up in an interview. Sometimes people try to get you in there and be clever and say, "Well, would you deliver that in a PDF or as a CHM file?" Well, if you don't know what a CHM file is, you need to first of all be very honest and [say] I'm not sure what that is. But ideally you would have a baseline knowledge of the fundamental tools and the fundamental delivery methods, just enough so that you can converse and at least have an idea to respond to just a simple question. Because, I guarantee you, the interviewer isn't going to know much more about CHM files other than what they read in a paragraph right before the interview.

To listen to the complete presentation, please visit <https://umconnect.umn.edu/p57831698/>.

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Katrina Reed is currently pursuing her MA in English: Technical Communication from Minnesota State Mankato. She works full-time at an engineering consulting firm where she is a grant and proposal writer/editor, and also serves as an editor for the Center for Excellence in Scholarship and Research (CESR). In her free time, she teaches English for the Kalamazoo Literacy Council.

Reflections

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I think that the Mankato MATC program is on the vanguard of technical communication graduate programs and this due to the time, experience, and effort of its instructors. Additionally, for those who attend and graduate from the program, we have a stake in the continuing success of the program—the more distinguished and exemplary the program becomes, the more valuable your degree will be. This should motivate current and former students to take an active role in the Technical Communication program community.

Last, as a final acknowledgement to the MATC program for what I learned and produced, as well as the support of the instructors, I am excited to report that I have been accepted into the Fall 2013 class at Texas Tech University in the PhD

in Technical Communication and Rhetoric program. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the preparation the Mankato program gave me.

I wish you all the best and I hope that all your goals are fulfilled in the MATC program.

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Fer O'Neil is a knowledgebase technical writer for a global security software company in San Diego, California. He is completing his master's degree in Technical Communication at Minnesota State Mankato, and has been accepted into the PhD program in Technical Communication and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University.

The Use of Website Forms to Teach Document Structures

By Jon Negrelli

Classes in Technical Communication stress the importance of clarity and formal structure in written communications. Students must learn to write a piece of non-fiction that contains information presented in a format the reader expects. This concept seems simple, yet upon grading assignments, there appears to be a lack of consideration, by most students, for using the proper document format. In an effort to remedy this problem a series of online forms were developed that force students into fulfilling each section of documents in an organized manner. This article presents the initial development of this idea.

The formal business letter requires specific information to be contained in the header, body, and closing of the document. If anything is omitted the writer of the document is considered to be uneducated or not believable in their writing. The reader expects a certain format based on the type of document he is reading.

Structures simplify the message we wish to convey. Look at the difference between the following two numbers and see how different meanings are portrayed by the different symbols:

2,123,145,505 (212) 314-5505

One is a large number and the other is a phone number; both made identifiable with the proper punctuation. Parentheses, commas, and hyphens are essential to conveying the full meaning and format of the intended message.

The online form is a universally accepted and recognized structure used to convey information that is understood and expected by sender and receiver. This is the main reason this construct was used. Each section of a form was modeled after a required section within a document studied in class. Forms were developed for a Memorandum, a Formal Business Letter, and a Lab Report (Beers [1], [2], [3] 2009). Here is an example of the header section in an informal Lab Report (see Fig. 1).

DATE:	March 4, 2013	(The date is automatically entered for you)
TO:	<input type="text"/>	(Who are you sending this to?)
FROM:	<input type="text"/>	(Enter your name here)
RE:	<input type="text"/>	(State the topic here)

Fig. 1. Header in the Lab Report Form.

Every form field had to be filled out with the required information. If the student omitted any section a “nag” screen (see Fig. 2) would pop up advising them to return to the form.



Fig. 2. Nag screen.

After completing the form the student would press the button labeled “Review the Proper Form” to view his finished work (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Submit button.

The following web page would then illustrate the standards expected in the finished work. For example, Fig. 4 shows the results of filling out the header previously discussed in this paper.

DATE: March 4, 2013
 TO: Mr. Ted Jones
 FROM: Bill Thomas
 RE: Combining talents for newest project

Fig. 4. Completed header section.

There were a total of 110 students and they all had the option of using the online Memorandum form or writing one on their own. Every student that used this online form complied with the standards needed to complete the assignment and received higher grades than those that did not.

(View this form at <http://www.webtesting123.com/Memorandum.cfm>.)



The Use of Website Forms

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The same results were achieved with the Formal Business Letter form. Those that studied the online form received an average of one letter grade higher than those that did not. Every section was completed properly and if there were any errors they were contained within the body of the letter itself. Hopefully a lot of those errors would be corrected by paying attention to the error-finding features of Microsoft Word.

(View this form at <http://www.webtesting123.com/formalbusinessletter.cfm>.)

The Lab Report was the most difficult form to develop. It had many more sections to it and was very complex. There were over a dozen sections to the form and each one required a specific piece of information. By placing an explanation within each section, students were better equipped to provide the data expected within that portion. As the process of grading these papers has begun it seems the results are very positive. There are errors in constructing tables and identifying figures that can be corrected in future versions that would solve this problem.

(View this form at http://www.webtesting123.com/lab_report.cfm.)

Although this project is in its initial testing phase, there are many positive results. Students understand the format of their written documents by viewing them in the step-by-step procedure of online forms. Students complete every section and include the data expected for that portion. Future developments would include forms for a proposal plan and a formal report. As the results are studied over the next several semesters, it seems plausible to obtain scholarly research useful in teaching document structures to students of Technical Communication.

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Jon Negrelli is currently in his third year as an instructor of technical communication at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio. The online Technical Communication program at Minnesota State Mankato allows him to teach and study at the same time.

What I Learned in the First Five Years

By Jonathan Chandler

I began my career as a technical writer roughly five years ago. Before that, I spent a handful of years pursuing my bachelor's and master's degrees in English with a concentration in technical writing. What I compiled below is a short list of some of the most important things I wish I had learned while still in school. I am sure these are things people told me, but I did not learn until I was ready. While this list is not particularly profound, maybe what I learned in these last five years will help technical communicators as they begin their career in this wildly expanding field.

Find Internships

The first thing I suggest is taking part in an internship. If possible, work for different companies. This not only looks good on a resume, but it also helps expose you to the variety of technical writing jobs available.

Internships are great for both parties. Businesses love them because they are low risk, and they are great for students because they provide an amazing opportunity to get your feet wet. They allow you to implement the ideas and fundamentals you've been studying. In addition, they give you some real-world experience to help you reassure you that this is the career for you.

Sometimes, if it works out, an internship can lead to a hired position. I began my career as an intern for a large manufacturing company documenting manufacturing equipment. Five years later, I'm still here. My role has expanded greatly and the types of documents I produce have grown, but I would not be here had it not been for that internship.

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What I Learned

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Learn Software

Learn as much software as possible, and I don't mean just the industry standard documentation software. Almost without fail, technical writers must wear several different hats. In addition to writing, technical writers manipulate images, layout content, create illustrations, design training material, shoot and edit video, manage content, and perform a variety of other duties along the way. To do all of these things, you have to have the right tools.

Of course, you should be familiar with programs, such as FrameMaker or Flare, but it would be wise to become fluent in things like PhotoShop, Illustrator, RoboHelp, Captivate, and SharePoint. Having experience with these kinds of tools will really help you as you progress in your career. Learning and mastering these tools will show future employers that you are not just capable, but that you are teachable.

This effort to continue learning once on the job is essential to continued success. The technical writing market is continuously changing, growing, and becoming more diverse. Staying up to date on current trends and tools ensures that you are not only working at maximum efficiency, but that you are increasing your value. The more skills you have, the more you are worth. Increasing your worth is never a bad thing.

Develop a Portfolio

Creating a diverse portfolio is extremely valuable when looking for a job. If you view the job postings available, you'll see that most employers want to see samples. Employers want to know that you not only have the education, but that you have used that education to produce

do in a very tangible way. Having a beautiful resume is great, but having a great portfolio to accompany that resume will put you miles ahead of the competition.

Get Connected

Getting involved in the local technical communication community is always worthwhile. In my opinion, becoming an active member of your local STC chapter is an important part of growing as a writer. Attending regular STC meetings is a great way to learn about current topics in technical communication. Equally important is the opportunity to network that being an active member allows.

If possible, volunteer for a position. Since volunteering as membership manager for the STC Atlanta chapter, I've had the opportunity to meet a bunch of really great writers who work in a variety of fields. I learned about the multitude of technical writing jobs that people hold, we share best practices, and we get to lament about the woes of technical writing. I'm joking about that last part, but it really is a great way to ensure you stay current. Additionally, becoming active and taking a position looks good on the resume you should always work to improve.



Familiarizing yourself with various software programs will help you along the way.

something. Compiling some of your best work from class projects is always a good idea. If you're not happy with those projects, creating some sample documents to have available will go a long way when trying to land that perfect job.

Presenting samples is essential and managers want to see what you can

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The Rhetorical Strategies of Sluts: A Review of Scholarship Pertaining to PETA

By Sarah FitzSimmons

Complete press sluts. According to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) co-founder, Ingrid Newkirk, her animal rights organization survives because its activists are just that (Atkins-Sayre 2010, p. 310). Their aggressive tactics are appealing to some; with over three million members and supporters and an annual budget of approximately \$37.4 million, PETA is the largest animal rights organization in the world (PETA 2012). As the wife of a commercial pork producer, I am not a proponent of PETA; as a student of technical communication, however, I am interested in exploring the effectiveness of verbal and visual rhetorical strategies that PETA utilizes to make animal rights a frequent topic of discussion in the media.

Verbal Rhetoric

In his article, “Extending the Rights of Personhood, Voice, and Life to Sensate Others: A Homology of Right to Life and Animal Rights Rhetoric”, Jason Black, assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Alabama-Tuscaloosa, analyzes how animal rights movements use language to call for the rights of the sensate other in rhetorical frameworks of personhood, voice, and sanctity of life. Based on Kenneth Burke’s suggestion that scholars critically analyze how rhetors craft their messages, Black examines white papers obtained from PETA, the Rutgers Animal Rights Law Center, The Great Ape Project, and People for Animal Rights.

Personhood. One rhetorical strategy that Black discovers is personhood,

where activists attempt to move the human viewpoint of “animals as things” to “animals as living people”. To apply personhood, activists avoid using metonymy, the Burke trope where the attribute of an object is used to identify the whole. For example, activists view the term “pork” as a metonym that reduces a pig into a dispensable thing that can be justifiably used for food, clothing, experimentation, and entertainment. In place of metonymy, activists give animals human characteristics; if a human can imagine the pork on his plate with a face and conscience, he can recognize that a living life is attached to his meal (see Fig. 1). The rhetorical strategy of personhood attempts to erase the us/ them mentality that causes humans to see animals as things instead of beings.



Fig. 1.

Voice. Besides attempting to sway the human viewpoint of animals through

the use of personhood, activists employ a second rhetorical strategy. Activists dispute society’s argument that animals do not possess the abilities to fight for their dues by giving the animals voice. With this rhetorical strategy, activists compare animals to infants; neither can speak, but both have rights that must be met by society. In their claims that animals must be considered as persons who deserve the right to be protected from harm, PETA supplies voice to animals who cannot speak for themselves (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2.

The Rhetorical Strategies of Sluts

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Sanctity of Life. Based on his analysis, Black concludes that the final rhetorical strategy that activists use is arguing based on the sanctity of life. Activists utilize this strategy to remind consumers that, based on Darwinism, we all evolved from animals; therefore, humans and animals must coexist with a shared right to life (see Fig. 3). Further, activists warn that animals are related to humans, and if animals can be used unethically, humans may also be used unethically. The idea that the treatment of animals reflects our treatment of each other attempts to influence humans to give animals the same right to ethical lives.

In her article, “Embracing Humanimality: Deconstructing the



Fig. 3.

Human/Animal Dichotomy”, Carrie Packwood-Freeman, animal rights activist and assistant professor of communication at Georgia State University, also analyzes animal advocacy rhetoric. Her biased viewpoint, however, moves her research into a different direction than that of Black’s. Whereas Black identifies and explains the verbal rhetorical strategies employed by PETA and the animal rights movement, Packwood-Freeman focuses on the “faulty” mindsets of non-animal activist society members. Her examination of humanist terminology, which focuses importance on human interests, allows her to ponder how PETA and other animal rights groups should rhetorically construct themselves as animals through the process of humanimality. She assesses that the current use of humanist terminology in society allows humans to separate themselves from the animal “others”, making it easier for

them to avoid acknowledging their inner animals. She further concludes that humanist terminology has two inconsistent definitions of the term animal: (a) a benign definition that includes humans and (b) a negative definition that represents what is “unhuman” (p. 13). To overcome this double meaning and better convince society that animals and humans are one, she suggests that activists use a non-speciesist term like “nonhuman animals”; this term, she claims, would provide humanimality by reminding humans that they are animals.

Visual Rhetoric

PETA employs both verbal and visual rhetorical appeals. By critically examining a basic PETA mail-out, all print ads posted on the PETA website from 2001 to 2003, and PETA’s online materials in 2005, Wendy Atkins-Sayre, communications professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, gained insight into PETA’s visual rhetorical strategies. In her article, “Articulating Identity: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and the Animal/Human Divide”, Atkins-Sayre explores how PETA creates support for animal rights by using visual rhetoric that encourages consumers to scrutinize their perceptions on reality; for example, PETA’s visual appeals force people to question if the images of brutalized animals stand firm with what they truly believe about animal treatment. Accompanying the strong visual strategy are words that add to the message and draw additional attention to the campaign. Atkins-Sayre explains that PETA uses visual rhetoric because “in developing an argument through writing, one must walk the reader step by step through an argument; the visual can provide clearer and faster proof of the claim” (p. 315). PETA uses images to articulate that humans and animals share an identity. Through her analysis, Atkins-Sayre finds that all of the ads use images that promote a shared identity through the use of several characteristics:

Shared Emotions. They stress shared emotions between humans and animals, asking humans to question whether human and animal identities are truly separate (see Fig. 4).

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Fig. 4.

Humans in the Animal World. They place humans in the animal world, asking humans to connect with the animal experience (see Fig.5).

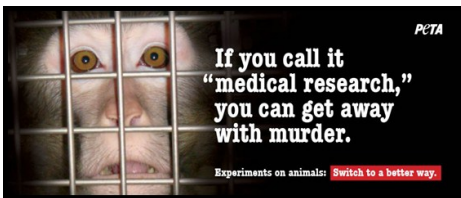


Fig. 5.

Broken Down Barriers. They break down barriers, combining human and animal characteristics to show a significant amount of shared substance (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6.

Effective Rhetoric?

PETA utilizes a combination of visual and verbal rhetorical strategies to gain attention, but are these strategies really effective? Laura Hahn, professor of communications at Humboldt State University, in her article, "I'm Too Sexy for Your Movement: An Analysis of the Failure of the Animal Rights Movement to Promote Vegetarianism", examines animal rights slogans, animal rights productions, and PETA commercials. Her analysis indicates that PETA uses a rhetorical appeal primarily based on sex to promote a non-meat eating lifestyle. While the appeals do create media attention, they fail to create a persuasive argument against the consumption of meat. PETA ad campaigns, Hahn assesses, create an invitation for women to "consider their own appearances in comparison to the protestor rather than reflect on the plight of animals" (Hahn 2010, p. 84). The female consumer becomes an object without agency in the campaigns.

Hahn's assessment of PETA campaigns also finds that PETA fails to gain the solidification of a sense of community. Her analysis of the PETA merchandising website finds that all of PETA's sexy slogans are flashed across form-fitting T-shirts that are modeled by beautiful women. Additionally, her analysis of PETA's YouTube videos, television commercials (most of which have been banned from airing), and magazine advertisements finds that the vegetarian message is abandoned in favor of the provocative (see Fig. 7). This inability by most people to

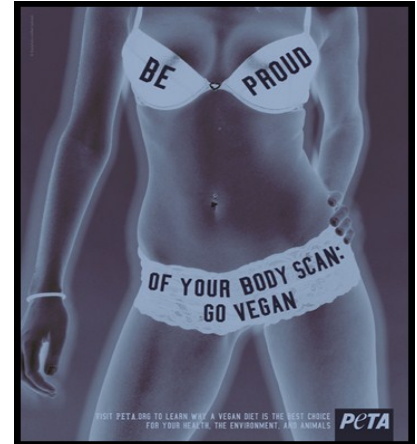


Fig. 7.

connect with sexual images of models causes a lack of identity to the PETA brand; associating an unattainable model's figure to vegetarianism suggests to the average viewer that vegetarianism will not work for them. Worse than the inability to form solidification, though, is the managerial rhetoric that these sexual ads convey. Managerial rhetoric keeps the existing system viable; viewed through a feminist perspective, the sexy portraits of women in PETA ads make women commodities (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 8.

The Rhetorical Strategies of Sluts

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In his article, "PETA and the Rhetoric of Nude Protest", Brett Lunceford, assistant professor of communication at the University of South Alabama, discusses how PETA has incorporated nudity and the objectification of women into its public protests. But these pornographic protests (i.e., naked women sitting outside in chains to protest the alleged mistreatment of circus elephants), he claims, detract from the post-humanist aim that Packwood-Freeman suggests PETA attempt. For PETA, these demonstrations may provide a means for humans to become more animalistic; according to Lunceford, however, these demonstrations simply provide shock value, not rhetorical significance. These protests provide the protestor with a sense of affirmation, but do not persuade the casual onlooker to consider the message behind the demonstration. By looking at past studies in advertising, Lunceford actually finds that sexual appeals often detract from the retention of message arguments; brand recall is not affected, but the recall of copy is. Hahn and Lunceford both show how PETA utilizes the "sex sells" mentality. They also both conclude that, while effective in gaining media attention, the sexy rhetoric motivates the already convinced, but likely fails to recruit new members to the cause.

Using a combination of verbal and visual rhetorical strategies that appeal to sex to obtain media exposure for their cause, PETA is bringing attention to its organization. While there is some research available regarding PETA's current rhetorical strategies, and also some research suggesting future

strategies for PETA to follow, research on the rhetorical strategies employed by other animal rights movements (for example, the Humane Society of the United States) is lacking; this research could add insight into the animal rights rhetoric conversation. Additional analysis on the rhetoric employed by "targets" of animal rights activists could also provide a deeper view into the animal/human debate. Existing research suggests that PETA uses its rhetorical strategies to keep itself in the public eye, however, its strategies are primarily effective only with its members. To better spread its message to the general population, existing literature suggests that PETA should acknowledge its rhetorical strategies that are effective while tweaking those strategies that do not appeal to the general population. With the right rhetoric, PETA can possibly transition from "press sluts" to relevant revolutionaries.

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Sarah FitzSimmons graduated from the University of Minnesota with a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Industries and Marketing before pursuing a master's degree in Technical Communication at Minnesota State Mankato. Currently an editor at the Center for Excellence in Scholarship and Research (CESR), Sarah is graduating in May.



An Interview with Alisha Sauer, a Technical Writer

By Yvonne Weiling Tok

Alisha Sauer is a technical writer at SHAZAM, Inc. in Des Moines, IA, and the current president of the Central Iowa STC Chapter. This is an interview that was conducted between Yvonne Weiling Tok, a graduate student at MSU, Mankato pursuing a degree in technical communication, and Ms. Sauer.

Alisha has offered an elaborate and in-depth contribution about the concept of technical communication. She answers some interesting questions about the field, and helps address some issues currently faced in the field, which include the history of technical communication, the place of technical communication in academia and the professional world. She also addresses the requirements of a good technical communicator and her personal interest in the field.

What made you decide to be a technical communicator?

Alisha was interested in creative writing in college, so she took many writing classes at her small liberal arts school. She was also working full time while in school, and as she neared graduation the company she worked for had an opening for an entry-level technical writer. She hadn't been sure how her degree was going to translate to a career, so she decided to give it a try. Luckily, it ended up working out for her.

How long have you been working in your current position?

Alisha has been working for her current employer since 2003; however, she has held three different positions

there. When she started, she was a customer service specialist, assisting clients on the phone. Then, she was hired as a technical writer in 2005, after receiving a BA in English. In 2009, she was promoted to business analyst. In 2010, she took a brief hiatus from her current company to work for Ames Laboratory as an editor. In March 2012, a more senior-level technical writing position became available, so she came back with the same company. So, she spent most of her career in the same place.

What current software are you using that pertains to technical communication?

Alisha uses Microsoft Word, Adobe FrameMaker, and Adobe Photoshop for most of the documentation she creates (which is published in PDF using Adobe Acrobat). She uses Adobe RoboHelp as an online help system to support the company's web-based software, and Alisha notes that they use a Plone content management system for the company's intranet, which she manages. She also uses Adobe Photoshop to create and edit graphics. Her department purchased the Adobe Technical Communication Suite, which contains most of what they need for day-to-day needs.

Did you major in technical communications in undergrad, and if not, what made you decide to pursue technical communications?

Alisha did not major in technical communication; rather, she majored in English with a focus on writing, which was the track offered at Grand View

College). She realized that she enjoyed technical communication after she was hired as a technical writer, which she thought was challenging and interesting work.

In your personal view, what do you think it takes to be a good and effective technical communicator?

According to Alisha, technical communication needs people with great expertise. She says a technical communicator needs a solid foundation in communication and grammar, the ability to work well with others, and a willingness to constantly learn. The field of technical communication has, over the last couple of years, gained substantial recognition in academia and the professional world. The field, like other areas of academia and professions, has diverse requirements every individual seeking to venture in must meet to become an effective and good technical communicator.

For an individual to be an effective communicator, he/she should have a solid foundation in grammar and communication. One should have the ability to work in a team and be willing to learn. Technical communication is a complex, though interesting, field; it requires an individual to learn new ideas and apply the latest trends in the field. A technical communicator is obligated to adhere to instructional procedures, as well as to have elaborate knowledge about his/her audience.

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What I Learned

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Remember the Basics

This might be a no-brainer for most of you, but it is something I often remind myself. Always remember that at the base of everything you do, you are a writer and your job is to explain a topic in the simplest way possible. Never lose sight of who you are trying to reach and what you are trying to say. Despite the new technologies and groundbreaking innovations, our talent is rooted in our ability to write.

Charles Bukowski wrote, "Genius might be the ability to say a profound thing in a simple way." Granted, I am no genius, and the documents I create are far from profound; nevertheless, I do try to keep them simple. I try to remember my audience and work to tell them what they need to know while stripping away the fluff. Always remembering this idea helps to ensure I head in the right direction.

This is what I learned in my first five years. There is nothing

groundbreaking here. Perhaps, these are things you already heard from professors or other professionals. Although not a complete list, these things make up a bulk of what I wish I had learned while still in school. Just like every document I write, I guess I had to first learn these lessons in order to properly explain them to you. Hopefully, I've done a decent job as a writer and what I've written helps someone along the way.

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Jonathan Chandler is a technical writer for Intralox, a worldwide manufacturer of modular conveyor belt systems. He writes in-house documentation for equipment used in the manufacturing process and customer documentation for conveyor systems. He received both his bachelor degree and master's degree in English from Southeastern Louisiana University. He currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia.

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In one of the books I read about technical communication, it stated that technical communication has yet to find its position in academia or as a professional endeavor. Do you think it's true? What are your arguments for that?

Alisha acknowledged that technical communication has grown to be a critical field in academia and the professional world. She stated that technical communication is an ever-changing field because our means of communication is dependent on technology. Technical communication is a dynamic and ever-growing field in academia and the professional world.

Some people feel that technical communication is not as significant as other disciplines; it is not highly respected. What do you think?

Alisha argued that while this might be the case in academic, it is not the case in the industry. She's worked on project teams to roll out new products and has provided valuable service in created documentation that clients will use. Alisha said the other members of her team, such as software developers, business analysts, marketing specialists, etc., respect her role and appreciate the services she provides.

Do you think technical

communication is an invention, creation, or modification?

There has been a raging controversy concerning the nature of technical communication, whether its purely an invention, creation, or modification. As indicated by Alisha, technical communication entails relaying information by creating required information products. Based on the strong technological developments realized in recent days, organizations have dynamic and sophisticated documentation systems which help in storage and retrieval of information.

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An Interview with Alisha Sauer

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This phenomenon expounds on the idea that technical communication integrates the three concepts of invention, creation, and modification since the changing technologies requires invention and creation of new products. Technical retrieve and modify documented information products to fit clients' requirements, thus making it a modification.

Do you think technical communication has had a long history, or is it a relatively new profession?

Alisha believes that technical communication has undergone numerous milestones. The history of technical

communication has, however, been associated with antiquity. The current trends and developments of the field can be traced back to World War I and the evolution of technology at the end of the 20th Century.

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Yvonne Weiling Tok is pursuing a master's degree in Technical Communication from Minnesota State Mankato, as well as an MBA at a California University. Between classes, she works as a sales manager.

A Note From Your STC President

By John Maxwell

Hello. I am the current president of the Minnesota State University, Mankato chapter of the Society of Technical Communication (MnSU STC). My road to this is an interesting one. As a child, I had always wondered who was responsible for writing the documents that came with my new electronic gadgets or who got to put together the directions for that thing that required "some assembly." As I grew, those questions were replaced with other things that were more interesting or more pressing.

After high school, I attended college for several years pursuing a degree in biology. I left school and never finished. A few years went by and I found myself married with children and working in a job that was going nowhere. I had been involved with newspapers in my working life and knew I wanted to write for a living.

But journalism wasn't for me. I was

scouring the Internet for writing jobs and I stumbled upon an article about careers in technical writing. I recalled my childhood interest in this field and I started to look for more information. I soon found the Society for Technical Communication (STC) website and the rest is history.

If you aren't already a member of STC, you should seriously consider joining. They have a student membership that is very affordable and the benefits are worthwhile. Aside from receiving *Intercom*, the organization's published magazine, you also have opportunities to participate in a variety of webinars that the organization hosts. Not only do you have access to upcoming webinars, but STC also catalogs all of their past webinars that you can access at any time. STC members also have access to MySTC Network, which helps facilitate connections between fellow members, colleagues, and peers in the field of technical

communication.

On the home front, we are in the process of planning our upcoming meetings, which will include a handful of speakers who have years of experience in the field. We are also actively pursuing a social media presence, and hope to establish a strong image on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

I look forward to the future of our student chapter, and I hope you will join us. If you would like more information, please contact me at johnmaxwell@ymail.com.

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John Maxwell is a junior pursuing a bachelor's degree in Technical Communication. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, chasing his children around, and reading to them once they've been caught.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

For more information about the **Technical Communication program** at Minnesota State Mankato, please visit our website at <http://www.english.mnsu.edu/techcomm>.

You can also contact our **Program Director**:

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For more information about our STC chapter, please contact **Dr. Lee Tesdell** at lee.tesdell@mnsu.edu or **Dr. Jennifer Veltsos** at jennifer.veltsos@mnsu.edu.

