

# TECHNIQUES

Cross-Disciplinary Practice of Technical Communication

Fall 2008



SOCIETY FOR  
TECHNICAL  
COMMUNICATION

## Changing Times, Changing Technology, Changing Technical Communication

by Paula Naumann

Technical Communication emerged as an occupation in the 1950s. Following World War II, technological advancement led to the production of new industrial and consumer goods. Jobs were created for technical writers who were responsible for the production of documentation to accompany complex mechanized equipment. General Motors, General Electric, and Westinghouse established technical writing departments.

The 1960s and 1970s ushered in the computer age. Much of the new technology was extremely complex and necessitated clear documentation. Again, technical communication roles increased in number. The 1980s introduced us to the personal computer. New, technologically-inexperienced users required manuals to address every aspect of their hardware and software(Spool).

During the 1990s, technical communicators were increasingly included on design teams for software and user-interfaces. Pointing out the benefits of user-centered design, they developed usability testing procedures. The explosion of internet usage during the decade called for a whole new approach to providing technical information.

Frederick M. O'Hara saw the future clearly when he stated in 2000, "The profession of technical communication has changed radically since its beginning, and there is no reason to think that it will remain unchanged in the future. On the contrary, the historical record would indicate that the rate of change will increase even faster" (O'Hara).

As we begin the 21st century, the field of technical communication has shifted away from writing as its primary focus. Technical communicators are now called upon to design communication using audio, video and interactive media. A state-of-the-profession article at the end of 2006 reported, "The move to XML authoring and to DITA have fostered a much needed examination of the changing roles required of technical communicators who are working with organizations making a move to content management and/or expanding their reach into the global product marketplace. As such, 2006 saw a trend toward the development of highly sought-after skills—topic-based structured writing, interaction/experience design, information architecture, taxonomy development, and increasingly, translation and localization skills. This trend should be expected to continue for the next few years as the global market for technical communication professionals expands, providing organizations shopping for technical communication workers with a much larger pool of talent to choose from" (Abel).

Every facet of business, industry and government that reaches users through traditional or electronic avenues has a potential need for a technical communicator. On the other hand, outsourcing of jobs, economic slowdowns and the shift to do-it-yourself webpage management have made entry-level positions in technical communication difficult to secure.

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## Changing Technical Communication *(continued from page 1)*

The keys to working in this changing and challenging field seem to be diversity and flexibility. Although highly-polished writing skills were the once the foremost need of employers, today's applicant must possess skill using a variety of software programs and will benefit from specializing in state-of-the-art delivery methods. In August, 2008, current hiring trends were outlined: "Technical communicators willing to work onsite (at least part of the time), who have subject-matter experience in data security, mobile applications frameworks, and/or open source systems, and who have a track record of creating developer-oriented content are currently popular" (Davis).

According to Andrew Davis, president of Synergistech Communications, the traditional technical communication role has ceased to exist. While that may be somewhat of an overstatement, it is easy to see that technical communication as a profession has undergone an incredible amount of change since the 1950s. Positions that require talented technical communicators are not limited to the areas of complex machinery and computers any longer. Various fields have recognized the need for the skills of technical communication professionals who are willing to apply their skills to previously unexplored sectors. This issue of *Techniques* focuses on some areas of technical communication that are of interest to students who are currently studying the profession.

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**"No matter which industry you're considering for a career, it probably employs technical communicators. Technical communicators work in computer science, medicine, environmental studies, electronics, government, cinema, the aerospace industry, and just about any field in which people must interpret and use technology. They are an indispensable part of today's technological society."**

- stc.org

# Technical Communication and Graphic Design

## Working Together

by Jim Florey

In today's very graphical world you are virtually bombarded with billboards, posters, advertisements and even what has come to be termed as junk mail. All of these are made up of many colors, graphics, and photos all designed to entice you into purchasing or doing something. Technical communication today goes far beyond writing user manuals and documentation. Today's consumers have become accustomed to graphics, and today's technical writers must accommodate these expectations.

### Graphic design enhances technical communication

Graphic design is a powerful tool for the technical writer. Technical illustrations can assist the text in a document by providing a visual perspective, which leads to more accurate understanding by the user. Think, for instance, about trying to explain the workings and parts of a complicated mechanical device. Explanation through text only is possible, but through the use of graphics, such as exploded diagrams and cutaways, your explanation would be much more understandable, and would use far fewer words. Kevin Hulsey is quoted as stating in an interview that, "technical illustration is a method of visually explaining the complexity and mechanical operation of an object in an easily understood format" (Creative Behavior).

Charts and graphs are another effective tool that aid clarity and understanding to different types of data. Charts and graphs help readers visualize information. For example, describing the fluctuations of water levels in a river at a particular dam over the course of a year with text only would result in a very long, and most likely, hard to understand document. By summing up this information into a graph including some limited textual documentation, the technical communicator can convey the information in a format from which the user can quickly identify the desired data.

Graphic design in technical communication plays a role the initial time a reader uses the material and also helps the reader to remember the information they have just come to understand. Mark Walston supports this when he states, "In fact, according to research cited by educational psychologist Jerome Bruner of New York University, the average person remembers only 30 percent

of what is read, but nearly 80 percent of what is seen" (Walston).

Overcoming language barriers can also be a difficult problem for the technical communicator. Due to time, budget, or space restraints, it may not be possible to have a document translated and written in several languages. Even if this can be done, there is always the chance of overlooking the nuances in language of a particular audience. Universally recognizable illustrations that accompany the writer's text can go great lengths to minimize language barriers.

### Design software and the future of technical communication

Software based drawing programs greatly speed up the process of creating graphics. As with most technologies, these are becoming more powerful everyday and can assist the technical communicator. However, no matter how powerful these tools become, it is unlikely they will ever replace the need for a good technical communicator with graphic design skills. An effective technical illustration will always require a human touch. Kevin Hulsey clearly shows his agreement with this view when he stated, "Only a human can decide what another human will find aesthetically pleasing and understandable" (Hulsey).

Today's technical communicator must be versed with a sound knowledge of writing and the skills to do graphic design, or at least understand the importance and usefulness of graphics. How to use them in coordination will establish you as an effective and successful communicator.

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# Freelance Writing: Continue to Explore

by Holly Eiden

**“Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you’re doomed.” - Ray Bradbury**

The writing world is full of opportunities. It is also full of competition and hard work. The U.S. Labor Bureau predicts that employment of writers and editors will grow at an average 10 percent from 2006 to 2016. Once a job has been acquired, job perception is the next problem. Obtaining a degree in Technical Communication is an effective step in preparing for a writing career and the next step is to find a niche. Writing in a variety of ways and fields in order to find that career niche is the essence of freelance writing. Freelance writing is a lesser known option for Technical Communication students, or anyone with a degree in writing.

Freelance writing is a form of technical writing that should be explored by more students. This job option gives serious writers the ability to work at their own pace. The amount of money that is made is based on the amount of work and dedication the writer has invested. Freelance writing jobs pay by the hour, day, or job instead of by salary through one employer. While many people might want the benefit of salary, others will appreciate this type of pay as it allows them to explore a variety of writing experiences and make choices most interesting and fulfilling to them. This career option enables graduates to explore their writing talents without hindering the numerous writing options that a writer has.

Freelance writing helps to continue the writer’s education because it does not tie them to one writing job and it presents the opportunity to explore a variety of writing topics. Writing about medicine does not require a degree in medicine. However, most distinguished freelance writers have the academic experience to propel their career (Wheeler 25). If you love to write about medicine, then research medicine. According to the Mankato State Career Development Center (CDC), science and medical writing is one of the most prominent jobs for technical writers. The CDC suggests that you take computer and science courses in order to become familiar with material in these fields. Taking courses within other degree brackets to further your knowledge is another option as there are employers, according to the CDC, in a variety of fields looking for people with good writing skills.

By exploring specific academic fields, a freelance technical writer is able to gain the knowledge needed to write on a specific topic. Choose any subject that is of interest and then do the research to create a broad and reliable base of knowledge. Once a subject has

been picked, researched, and the knowledge received is satisfactory, explore jobs that pertain to that area of study. Freelance writing forces a writer to become educated on a variety of topics. There are endless possibilities in becoming a freelance writer. There are employment opportunities writing for magazines, businesses, and online entities.

An English degree from MSU places a graduate sufficiently above many others when applying for similar jobs. Work hard in your classes because you can save some of your writing examples to show to future employers. Any concrete examples will benefit the way employers view your qualifications for a job. A degree in Technical Communication with a minor in a field such as Computer Science will open up a lot of opportunities.

Many freelance writers are self motivated and make a living by sending their work to publishers. The average salary for a freelance technical writer varies with the content of their work and area of study. Because many freelance writers do not get paid a salary by one employer it is tough to determine what one would, or could, make. Whether or not a freelance writer is self employed or works with a publisher is a large factor in defining pay. The median pay for entry level technical writers is around \$40,000/year (Bureau of Labor Statistics). However, according to a study done by Pay Scale, of the 250 individuals involved, the average freelance writer made about \$40.96 an hour, or \$85,280/year at full-time status.

Freelance technical writing is an option that should be explored by anyone who has an interest in writing. Explore options, find a niche, and get paid to write.

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# Technical Communication in Newspapers

by Emily Buss

Journalism is a highly competitive career field full of numerous writing styles, a variety of readers and many ways an article can be published. It also carries a broad spectrum of the kinds of writing one can do with a career in journalism. By having the basic knowledge of technical communication, a journalist can enhance their work.

A journalist is expected to utilize facts that describe ideas, events and issues that are applicable to the public (Wikipedia). They gather and broadcast information to anyone interested in reading what is going on. In a print publication, technical communication is the key to getting a good story. The type of work done in a newspaper journalism career will depend on the style of the newspaper and the frequency of publication. First, there are several kinds of newspapers. Among the most popular types of newspapers is community, business, humor/satirical, religious or shopper. A community newspaper is the type of paper that most people read. These are the dailies, the typical “town paper”; for example the Mankato Free Press. A business type of newspaper deals primarily with finances, numbers and stocks. The New Yorker and the Wall Street Journal are classified as business newspapers. A humor or satirical newspaper is a paper that puts current issues into joke form, offers fake information for entertainment purposes or plays on words. A famous example of that would be the Onion. Whether it is a serious or not-so-serious newspaper, there are some key things to know in order to be successful in the newspaper business.

It first starts with finding a journalist or reporter to get involved in the creation of the story; investigation, observation of events and interviews with sources (Wikipedia). Once the backbone of the article is created, the journalist can now take photos, organize the materials obtained from interviews and determine the focus of what the article will be. Once the focus of the article has been found, it is important to utilize what is called the “Inverted Pyramid”. The inverted pyramid is a style of writing that allows the writer to get the information across to the reader fast (Daily Writing Tips). It says to put the most important information at the beginning of the article and the least important information toward the end of the article. Now the journalist is ready to actually write the article. By using the inverted pyramid, the writer is able to professionally organize the information and relay it to the audience in a straightforward manner. The writer is expected to be efficient, grammatically correct and have an unbiased attitude toward each piece of writing, unless they are specifically told to be biased or the article is opinion based.



Now that a brief overview of duties as a journalist have been explored, let's take a look at the types of software used in the career field. Three programs frequently used in journalism are News Edit Pro IQue, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe InDesign or Quark XPress. These are basic software packages at a newspaper company and are standard programs a journalist should know. Although they may not all be called by these exact names, they are similar to each other.

News Edit Pro IQue is a great workflow tool that links each writer's stories to a main folder where it is visible to each writer at the newspaper company. The computer program has three slots, Desk, Publish, or, Web, in which to place a finished article. The Desk folder allows editors and peers at the company to view or edit the writer's article. If the article is placed into the Publish folder, the article cannot be altered and will be slotted to the copy desk people in order to be put into the next day's paper. Finally, if the article is placed into the Web folder, it is directly linked to the Internet on what is called the news wire. Newspapers connected to the news wire, and a majority are, will see the article, but the public will not unless the article is picked up.

The second and third types of standard software that a journalist will encounter are Adobe Photoshop and InDesign. Photoshop is a very popular type of photo editing program that enhances the visual effect of images and drawings (Rasmussen). Most large circulation newspaper journalists don't need to know this skill

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# Technical Communication in Children's Literature

by Beth Aughenbaugh

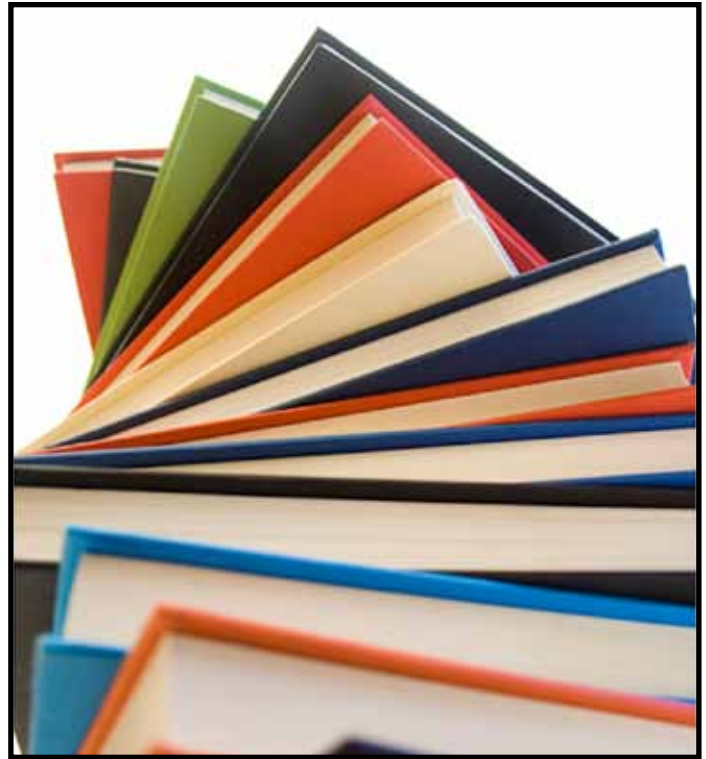
I've always liked stories. Hearing stories, telling stories, reading stories. They all interest me, and it was this interest that led me to pursue a career in English. While the technical communication standpoint wasn't my first idea, eventually I dabbled in everything the English department had to offer. Technical communication just happened to be the last thing that I tried. However, it also turned out to be a really perfect outlet that will eventually allow me to be a constructive part of the thing I love: Storytelling.

Even though the description for a technical writer or editor isn't usually connected with jobs in a literature based publishing company, that doesn't mean that there are no jobs available in this area for someone with such a background, quite the contrary in fact. I researched literature based editing, specifically children's books editing, and found that these companies need people to proofread and organize their text just as much as any technology based company does.

While researching the job field of technical writers I noticed a job title I hadn't seen or heard about: Publication Assistant. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) describes individuals working in these positions as people, "who work for publishing houses may read and evaluate manuscripts submitted by freelance writers, proofread printers' galleys, and answer letters about published material." This job could relate to a publishing company that focuses solely on adult fiction and nonfiction, or another branch more closely related to my interest in children's literature. It turned out in my research that almost publishing companies, children's books included, needed associates on hand to fulfill the duties that technical communication students and MNSU are trained to do.

Employees who can fill these positions are in demand. The BLS is expecting that the need for editing positions in literature will increase by 10% from 2006 to 2016. This is going to create around 30,000 new jobs for people with technical communication experience and an interest in publication within the next few years. And editing and writing has never been accessible in so many locations. Publication Assistants can enjoy the versatility of working in a large city where most of these publishing houses are located, or they can work from home using modern technology to send drafts, assignments and critiques.

I would have never dreamed I'd be able to apply my technical communication major to writing and/or editing children's books! In Mankato alone I found at least three publishing companies that focused on creating and



putting out children's books. One publishing company in particular, Capstone Press, is a leading educational publishing company for nonfiction children's books. They produce over 400 titles a year, covering numerous subjects and cultures. A quick search through their employment opportunities revealed an opening for an Assistant Editor, with a background that anyone in the technical communication degree could conceivably have. In this description the company is looking for someone who, "possess strong editing, communication, writing, experience with Microsoft Word and InDesign; and research skills." Sound familiar? These programs are right at the fingertips of the average technical communication student.

Fundamentally, publishing companies, whether specializing in adult's or children's books, need editors. Students in the technical communication field have the background to get these jobs, even in our own neighborhood.

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# Anticipating Audience Reactions

by Rusdon Torbenson



If you tried to sell deodorant to the Japanese by launching an advertising campaign featuring a cartoon octopus applying your product under each of its eight arms, you wouldn't do too well breaking into the market. Would it be because octopuses are considered to contain sacred spirits—not produce bad B.O.—according to Shintoism, Japan's native religion? Or perhaps the thought of glazing live octopus's tentacles (a favorite Japanese dish) with musk-scented antiperspirant produces more indigestion than sales? The real reason isn't quite so interesting, but it's no less causative: in Japan, an octopus' appendages are termed legs, not arms (Markel 78).

Failing to understand the perspective and nature of those you communicate with can be disastrous; at a minimum it can prevent the full realization of the deceptively simple goal of getting your point across. One of the primary tenets in the field of technical communication is that determining just who your audience is and then anticipating how they're likely to respond to your message is step one. Mark Markel, in the eighth edition of his comprehensive book *Technical Communication*, goes so far as to say that “audience and purpose determine everything about how you communicate on the job,” calling this “the key concept in technical communication” (67).

So is the answer simply to do your research before drafting that proposal for the textile company in Atlanta, before participating in that impending conference call with electronics manufacturers from Seoul? What if you don't have the luxury of advance preparation? Writing tutors at The Center for Academic Success (CAS) at Minnesota State University, Mankato sometimes encounter for example Sudanese, Japanese, and Pakistani American tutees—each retaining her native culture to some degree—in the course of a single shift. Thomas T. Barker defines culture as “the patterns of behaviors and

attitudes that ... characterize everything from nations to workplaces,” noting that it “can affect how people react to your asking them questions about their work” (120–21). One culture—such as that of the U.S.—values directness in communication, another—such as that of Japan—intimacy; how long a tutee has been living in the U.S. and how much she's adjusted to the culture will determine her receptiveness to a tutor's regular mode of communication.

One of the tutors at The CAS, Sarah<sup>1</sup>, told me that her biggest communication challenge during the Fall 2008 semester has come not with non-native tutees, but with a native Minnesotan, Mark, whom she works with several times per week. Mark is a conscientious student, meeting regularly with his professors in order to incorporate their suggestions into his papers, but he often disregards Sarah's suggestions concerning portions of papers that have been “okayed” by a professor, portions which may be passable grammatically, but which lack some focus. In her book *Technical Editing*, Carolyn D. Rude warns editors, “Measures of document success are described in terms of usability and persuasiveness more than textual features such as grammar. A document may be correct grammatically but still miss its purpose” (22). Upon recognizing that Mark wants to remain in control of his writing, Sarah changed tactics: she suggested he read a portion of his writing and then look away from the page, restating the portion aloud using simple, natural language. It worked. Mark immediately recognized the benefit of this simpler approach and, because the changes were his own, was able to improve the clarity and quality of his writing.

Becoming aware of an audience's existing knowledge, preferences, and expectations concerning a matter—regardless of what type of communication (written, oral, visual, or otherwise) you primarily engage in—will give you an advantage in your workplace. Whether you end up teaching English at the junior high level or advertising sporting goods to seniors, a background in technical communication will better enable you to serve people, will help you better yourself and further your career.

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed.

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# Civilian U.S. Military Technical Communicators

by *Katie Tormala*

Being a technical communicator in the military doesn't mean you have to join one of the branches and go through basic training. Technical communicators work on the civilian side of the military and there are also positions for employment with civilian contractors that work with various branches of the military. Military affiliated technical writers, communicators, and editors work all over the United States and have the opportunity to be stationed overseas. The mobility options as well as advancement to higher pay levels and benefits are great opportunities for any technical communicator.

One example of a civilian military position is with the Department of the Air Force. This position is called a technical writer and pays from \$45,000 to \$58,000 per year, with various duty locations throughout the United States. If employed by the federal government as a military civilian, an employee obtains federal benefits which includes paid holidays, sick days, health insurance, and annual vacation. Keep in mind that when you apply for a position with the United States government or are employed by a company who works for the government, you will normally have to obtain a security clearance as well as undergo a background check. Duties of the job include selecting illustrations and images for incorporation into material, researching technical documents to develop documentation projects, developing complex formats for manuals, guides, reports, catalogs, or other written material, and finally, explaining technical or other complex information orally and in writing. The information that the employee would be writing about would be related to electronics, aircraft, weaponry, engineering, or physical science.

The Department of the Navy advertises for a similar open position. This is for a technical writer/editor and pay ranges, depending on the position, range \$18,000 to \$150,000 per year. Similarly to the civilian Air Force position, this position is available at numerous locations which include Boston, MA; McAlester, OK; Virginia Beach, VA; Pearl Harbor, HI; and Washington D.C. The position asks that if you are able to translate hard-to-read, technical jargon and translate it into clear, easy-to-understand prose; you should consider applying. "In this occupation you may supervise, lead or perform various duties concerned with the writing and editing of technical materials." (Department of the Navy) The job announcement continues by stating that these materials can include: reports of research findings; scientific or technical articles, news releases or periodicals; technical regulations, manuals, specifications, or brochures; and speeches on technical or scientific subjects.



There are several opportunities and locations for working outside of the military with a civilian company that has been contracted by the military. The pay varies and does not offer federal benefits, since you are an employee of the contracted company and not the United States government. An example of civilian work contracted by the military is employment with GGS Technical Publication Services. This company has worked on projects with GE Aviation which supplies the United States Air Force with parts for many of their aircraft and for Lockheed Martin which supplies both the Navy and the Air Force with various parts. These companies contract GGS Technical Publications for the technical documentation, including manuals, on these parts. The software that is commonly used includes: IsoDraw, AutoCad, Micrografx Designer, Illustrator, AutoTrol, InterCap, and Corel Draw. (GSS Technical Publication Services.)

There are numerous positions with other civilian contracted companies and with the other branches of the military including the Department of the Army. Serving your country as well as assisting the active duty and reserve forces of the United States while they defend our freedom, is something that a typical technical communication job cannot offer.

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# Technical Communication in State Government

by Kyle Monson

My experience with the state government of Idaho deals with their system of rules and regulations as it applies to waste management. The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) employs a small staff of technical writers. I will be explaining what my role as an intern included as well as describing the responsibilities of a permanent Technical Writer/Editor. A broad spectrum of the duties of Idaho Government Technical Writers will also be included.

## DEQ Intern

I have been the Underground Storage Tank (UST) Assistant for the past two summers for DEQ. My job entailed reading and editing documents and contracts to correct errors and then uploading the paper copies onto the online database. The document types I encountered varied slightly from day to day. There were two documents I dealt with regularly.

The first document was a contract, usually between the state and a privately owned business. These documents state the rules and regulations that the business has to keep up to date and follow for the entirety of the contract's duration, including the policies and procedures involved in tank checking, installation, removal, or testing. It was my job to make sure all of the proper areas were signed and dated and that the documents were free of grammar and spelling errors.

The second common document was the results of the tank checking, installation, removal, or testing. These documents were not very complex; they were just lists of data to be archived. These were typically read over for errors in grammar or spelling and then uploaded within five minutes.

## DEQ Technical Writer

DEQ Technical Writers were responsible for drafting and writing the contracts between state and privately owned businesses. They made sure that all of the crucial information was included in the contract as well as ensured that there were not errors in grammar or spelling. The job was much more tedious because a lot of responsibility rested on their shoulders to produce a quality, error-free contract (*DEQ Job Description Guide*). If they failed in this task, they could make DEQ liable for lawsuits or enable the company to wiggle out of duties.

The document that listed the results of tank checking, installation, removal, or testing gave the DEQ Technical Writers a much busier job than I. The writers had to go over these very carefully to make sure every step

was taken for the given procedure. This was done by having the rules and regulations either pulled up on their computer screen or in paper form on their desk for reference. The Technical Writer would then make sure each provision was considered and up to code. Typically this meant checking that the test results of tank emissions were of the correct amount.

The main difference between an intern at DEQ and a permanently employed Technical Writer is that the Technical Writer has much more at risk than the intern. Interns typically do busy work and double check work that the Technical Writers have already done. The intern position entails formatting, editing, and finalizing contracts and results documents.

## Idaho State Government Technical Writers

Technical Writing positions with the state government of Idaho vary from branch to branch. However, a concrete list of capabilities and responsibilities prevail.

The typical Technical Writer's duties are writing or editing policy and procedure manuals and handbooks related to their area of expertise. The audiences each writer must consider are upper management, company employees, and sometimes the general public as well. This involves researching and testing their manuals and handbooks. Most Technical Writers will draft these documents and submit them to upper management such as a Head Technical Writer.

A Head Technical Writer's duties involve editing and publishing the submitted documents of the technical writing staff. Their most important task is managing and scheduling the work of their staff. This includes development of cost estimates and proposals for their bosses.

When any Head or regular Technical Writer is not busy with the regulated work, their other role is providing technical assistance to the rest of their branch.

These are the standard guidelines for the qualifications of most Idaho Technical Writers: "Interpreting and translating laws, regulations, or policies into written procedures; researching, composing, and editing technical information materials; using word processing equipment and software to modify or develop technical or complex material in final form." (*Capital City Development Corp.*)

All technical writing jobs include revising, formatting, and editing documents. What changes is the type of document that is created. Someone in a science

(continued on page 15)

# The Application of Technical Communication in Psychology

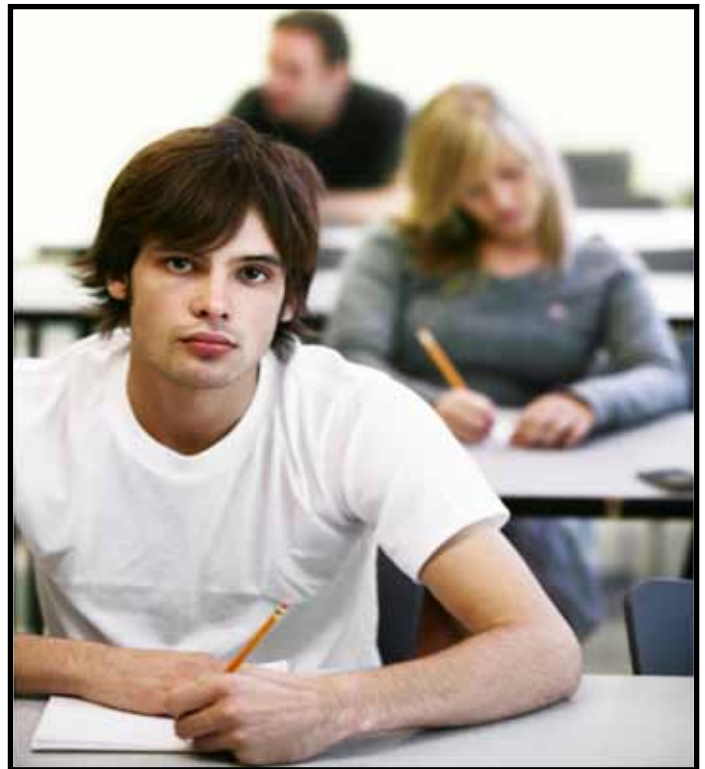
by Bennett Selchow

Communication is likely to be the single most defining characteristic of human existence, and it's our broad, deep, and expansive knowledge and use of it that defines us as a species. As such, it should come as no surprise that when psychologists study what makes humans tick, they not only study how humans communicate and interact, but they must also be very efficient communicators themselves. Headings, format, word choice, and others are all tools from the technical communication field that are also important to the psychologist as well. They use them to effectively state their ideas and compile data, but when they persuade you of the importance of what they've done.

First and foremost, there is the one format law that not only psychologists, but medical and business professions as well, live by: the American Psychological Association's format and style guide, more commonly known as APA format. Like the more common MLA style, it is a consistent way of writing various pieces of literature, such as experimental reports and persuasive essays. (The Writing Lab) However, the APA is much more technical style, better suited to the scientific process that is used in the social sciences like psychology. Using this kind of citation establishes credibility, and also provides a familiar backdrop that allows for easy navigation and clear interpretation of data. For more information on APA style format, please visit the overview and workshop on the APA format at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>.

However, that is only the surface of it, and what's truly important is not how the page is laid out. More than that, it is how ideas are communicated. Taking a look at Emily Pronin, John J. Fleming, and Mary Steffel's journal on the topic of how people communicate their values, one sees the standard for a psychology journal. The first thing they do is establish their credibility: "The desire to establish relationships with other people and to deepen already existing ones often leads people to open up about themselves. Indeed, actors' efforts to reveal information about themselves has been shown to play a key role in establishing interpersonal intimacy (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Jourard, 1971; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998)" (qtd. on 795).

They continue to tie pieces together until they've let the reader know that they are informed about their topic. From there, they move on to explaining, in depth, the procedures they used in each study, and give a



detailed analysis of their results. Finally, they wrap it up with a general discussion on the research, and they use this section of the journal to bring in all their studies, and inform the reader of what they've learned. So we can see that they use the same concepts that technical communicators work with: establishing credibility, persuading the reader, explaining procedures, and informing their audience.

Now you can see how apparent the use of technical communication is in psychology. However, more than psychology, it is fundamental part of the Information age in which we live. It's the nutritional information on the box of cereal we eat for breakfast, and it's on the tag of the clothes we put on in the morning. Psychology may be the study of the human mind, but communication is the day-to-day application of that mind.

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# A Psychological Model for Technical Writers

by *Dan Williams*

Dean Morris provides an excellent psychological model of how experimental psychology is used in technical writing. His model explains how reader's perceive, understand, learn, remember, and how a writer needs to present information in a way that these cognitive processes reach their fullest potential for the reader. The model is based on five distinct factors that explain why a writer needs to be effective while presenting information and how cognitive processes interact with this model. These five factors are the reader's psychological set, the mind's pattern forming tendencies, the span of short term memory, what is meaningful to the reader, and the mind's need for reinforcement. This article describes the reader's psychological set, the mind's pattern forming tendencies, and what is meaningful to the reader. I believe these three are the most important factors a writer needs to consider when creating a document.

A reader's psychological set refers to "the readiness of an organism to make a particular response, the disposition of readers to think or act in a particular way" (Morris 2). This set is also determined by the reader's prior experience. In technical writing, this prior experience means, how much prior experience has the reader had with the subject. If a writer does not take into account the readers psychological set, then interference may occur. This interference takes place when what the writer says or how they say it does not match the readers psychological set. For example, if a writer uses one term for an idea, then the reader will expect them to use it throughout the entire document. In contrast, if the writer interchanges terms for a single idea, then interference may occur and the reader may become confused or puzzled toward what the writer is trying to convey. Therefore, it is essential that a writer takes into account a reader's prior experiences and psychological set when writing a document.

The mind tends to seek meaningful patterns in perception, in understanding and learning, and in remembering. People learn best when they can relate new information to something they already know. Also, the mind likes to seek one meaningful pattern at a time. The figure-ground principle is an important concept to the writer. This refers to the visual aspects of the page layout. A writer needs to be consistent when using headings, phrases in text, and other devices that visually emphasize information. If they do not stay consistent, then there are too many patterns presented to the reader at once. A pattern that is regular, simple, stable, and

complete is the most effect way to present a pattern to a reader. Another important concept to the writer is the law of closure. Jacobi refers to the law of closure as "the major reason anything is important to anybody is the existence of a problem, and the best way for a writer to stimulate his/her reader's interest is by defining and stating his/her problem. The mind seeks to complete something that is incomplete" (Jacobi 39). This concept refers to the introduction of a document. A writer needs to hook the reader by stating and defining a problem in a concise and effective manner. If this is not accomplished, then the writer may lose credibility or the reader may discard the document altogether. Similarity should also be used when a writer is writing a document because similarity for the reader is perceived as being in one pattern. If the writer presents ideas or words that are similar, then he/she needs to stay consistent in the way they present these ideas. Presenting two similar ideas or words in a dissimilar way creates confusion for the reader.

Information is meaningful when it is familiar and can be pictured by the reader. When writing a document, the content will be more familiar to the reader when the writer uses the same vocabulary as the reader. For example, explaining new ideas in a way that the reader will understand them is essential when making the content seem more familiar to the reader. A writer can try to create a picture for the reader by using concrete language. As a writer, try to draw a picture with your words so that the reader can picture what you are trying to say. You can do this by using analogies and descriptive wording.

In conclusion, there are many cognitive processes that a writer should take into account when creating a document. They are important because it is human nature for people to rely on their senses and the organizations the mind creates for them. This does not just account for reading documents but also for basic human survival. If a writer does not take into account the way a reader will read the document, then there is a good chance their message will not be conveyed in a clear and understandable way.

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# Technically Communicating in Agriculture: A World Divided

by Paul Dobratz

It is startling how little exploration has been undertaken to understand the connection between the technical communicator and the role he or she plays in the agricultural industry. Agriculture is the world's largest industry and industry is where one would usually expect to find someone to communicate through handbooks or manuals that engineers, biologists, chemists, or a whole host of other scientists have created or discovered for the user's need. In addition to this lack of examination, there is a difference in the type of technical communicator needed between countries that are developed and those that are developing. As agriculture becomes more technologically dependent it is time to undertake an understanding of the role the technical communicator has played and will be playing in the future.

To explore the diversity and scope that technical communicators have in agriculture a review of technical communication courses that are part of an agricultural school's curriculum is a natural starting point. There are technical writing courses at the Agricultural Technical Institute in Wooster, Ohio. It is a two year agricultural school that provides an education for students interested in pursuing careers in animal industries, horticulture, agricultural business, and agricultural mechanics. The school was in the process of reevaluating their program in 1981. "...it became clear that it [technical writing course] was not fulfilling the individual needs of the students in the technologies or the needs of the students in the industries once they graduated" (Houston 3). They came to the conclusion that with a great deal of input from local agriculture industry specialists, they needed to develop two courses. One course would focus on the writing of proposals, process (procedural), and progress reports. The second course would center on business letter writing and brochure/newsletter publications. This is what is traditionally seen as the technical communicator's role in agriculture in the developed world. It is based upon enhancing the business or its share of the market. However, after reviewing other types of technical documents relating to agriculture a pattern began to emerge. A different type of technical communication is being undertaken in developing countries.

The types of manuals and handbooks or proposals and procedures written in or for developing countries do not have the focus placed on the needs of the business

but on the needs of the individuals using the materials. On the Eldis Resource site, there are several examples of manuals written for farmers, ranchers, and herders in developing countries. One example is "Human-Elephant Conflict Mitigation: A Training Course For Community-based Approaches in Africa" (Trainer's Manual). In the description of the manual it states that "the training course consists of five modules each including an introductory presentation, trainer presentations, and group discussions. Activities include measuring crop fields and damage areas, constructing mitigation measures, conducting practice interviews, and how to use a range of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques" (Parker 3). A second example is a little more 'traditional' in the sense that it is a document written to make sure guidelines are set so that scientific measurements are accurate. The manual "Operational guidelines for assessing impacts of agricultural research on livelihoods: Good practices from CIMMYT" is designed to help scientists follow "a livelihoods approach, this manual responds to the need of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT) scientists and field partners for guidance on impact assessment (IA)." The aim of this document is to help ensure quality in IA, institutionalize good practices, provide a resource list of approaches, tools, suggestions, and give examples of how CIMMYT does good IA with partners in diverse places and conditions. These are only two of several manuals that represent the types of documents being produced in developing countries to technically communicate current ideas and strategies. But, what of the future?

As with any industry, agriculture is being affected by the rapid expansion and evolving use of technology. In one direction there is the continuing globalization of agriculture. With the advancement of new technologies in farming to areas that had previously been indigenously used or cleared for use there will be a need for a communication of very technical procedures. In the other direction there is a need to communicate ideas and processes that are more culturally and locally specific. This is because many of the area in developing countries are marginal lands and need special care that does not fit the model of high-tech agriculture practiced in developed countries. Between the two there is a variety

*(continued on page 15)*

# A Professional Historian has Two Faces: The Researcher and the Writer

by Chad Myhre

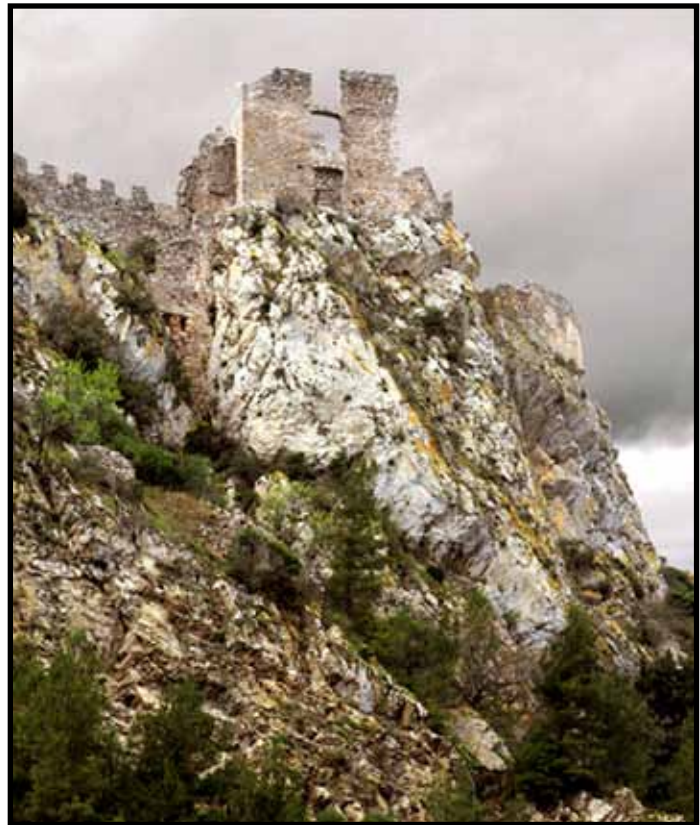
Technical communication is the covert framework for most careers. Although it can be as overt as a software tutorial designed by the company's technical writer, it is usually hidden behind the façade of another job title. Comparing the work of a professional historian to that of a technical communicator will reveal both the science behind technical communication, and the similarities between the two professions.

Professional historians who publish their research in academic journals must rely on the same concepts that technical communicators utilize. An article is just one example of work that historians create with technical communication principles. They also produce scripts for documentaries, write scholarly books and essays, create brochures for historic sites, and publish websites that many people rely on to separate truth from fiction. The function of the end product is different from the purpose of the tutorial mentioned earlier, but the historian uses the same structure the technical writer follows.

Both professionals begin their writing process with an outline to better manage their time and energy. A historian is then consumed with the systematic research process. A detailed outline will enhance the investigation into the past by limiting the scope. Once a topic is narrowed down to a single focal point, primary and secondary sources are analyzed to determine how and why an event occurred. Similarly, technical communicators gather information to understand the document's audience and purpose. Both professionals must assemble a logical structure for their document before proceeding to the next step in the writing process.

After the background information is collected and a rough draft is composed, a historian takes the role of an editor because the facts that were generated from the research must be verified. To promote ethos in historical writing, credibility must be established. Honesty is an important aspect in both historical documentation and technical communication. The reader must be able to trust that the information in the document is accurate. You would not continue reading an article that states that Benjamin Franklin was a president, nor would you continue to follow a procedure that had incomplete steps. In either case, the author should demonstrate a complete comprehension of the material and present it in a truthful manner.

Once the material is verified and final revisions are made, historians and technical communicators alike



format their documents. Most publishers have a style guide for the writers to follow, so the basic underpinnings of technical communication are intrinsic to producing a clear and concise synthesis. Information accessibility is the most important goal that both professionals share; they each want to make the information more accessible to the reader. Historians want to emphasize their argument and technical communicators want to emphasize the purpose of the document. Readers should have easy access to these components. Overall, both historians and technical writers start with an outline and gather information to create an honest representation of the material that can be effectively communicated to the audience. All of this is done without interfering with the reader's ability to access the information.

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# Technical Communication in the Hospitality Industry

by Hilary Rezmerski

It may be surprising that a bartender, bellhop, cook, and technical communicator could have something in common, but they just might. A single hotel employs all of these different professionals. There are many jobs that a technical communicator can do when working for a hotel or restaurant. Some of these jobs are common to other industries, but others are found exclusively in the hospitality industry.

Obvious jobs that technical communicators can do can be found in almost any business. They improve the company's website by making sure the site has pertinent information for their corporation and is easy to navigate. They also write policies and procedures for customer care. In the hospitality industry, this entails everything from front desk procedures at a hotel, to how to make a specific drink at a restaurant, to policies on how to deal with an irate customer. Another common job includes writing an employee handbook. A handbook covers a range of topics such as policies regarding paid time off, maternity leave, insurance benefits, or overtime pay.

The hospitality industry also has related jobs. For example, a technical communicator organizes and presents nutritional information for a restaurant. This information is sometimes included on a website or may be printed on an informational card that is distributed to diners. Another specific job is designing the menu for a restaurant. The technical communicator has to be familiar with the food of the restaurant in order to know which items should be pictured or highlighted. Additionally, they need to put together information that is on each table like a wine list or specials for the week.

There are also jobs with a more technical nature which relate to the hospitality industry. One job is to write and design training tutorials for the computer systems in restaurants or hotels. The technical communicator maintains or launches this training. Another technical job is writing several different kinds of manuals. These manuals cover topics from how to operate different equipment located on site, like the fryers or the grill at a restaurant, to mechanisms that regulate the chemicals in a pool at a hotel. Here the technical communicator must know who will use the equipment and in what type of environment. The technical communicator who creates these manuals may work for the



company that manufactures the equipment, but hotels and restaurants may also employ technical communicators to write manuals that address the specific needs of the hospitality industry. If they work for the restaurant/hotel they might produce trouble-shooting guides to help employees fix or maintain equipment. For instance, if a kitchen had a fryer with a clogged grease trap, the technical communicator could write a procedure outlining what steps should be taken to fix the problem, based on information from someone who has first-hand experience.

Finally, there are some jobs in the corporate world of the service and hospitality industry which may catch the technical communicator's eye. One job that originates at the corporate level is sending out memos. There is a lot of information that needs to be communicated to a wide audience, because restaurant or hotel chains usually have a high number of employees. The technical communicator needs to ensure that this is done professionally and punctually. In addition, a franchise hotel or restaurant needs a technical communicator to maintain communication with the corporation, including correspondence regarding the proposed purchase of a franchise as well as reports about the status of the project of building a franchise.

The technical world can meet the service world in the form of a technical communicator. Two totally different industries are combined with this wonderful career.

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## Technical Communication in Newspapers

*(continued from page 5)*

proficiently, however, at a smaller newspaper, the writer is the photographer and photo editor. So in this case, Photoshop is a useful tool to know. Inside Photoshop is an advanced selection of options to significantly enhance a photo. It takes ordinary images and transforms them into eye-catching, interesting photos to look at. If a reader sees an image that catches their eye, they are more likely to pick up a copy of the paper. Adobe InDesign is a program that deals with the designing and putting together of the newspaper; layouts, formatting, etc. Although it isn't crucial for the writer to know how to use these products, it may be useful for a writer who works at a smaller newspaper where they have more jobs than just writing the article.

Once the writer has a grasp on these tools, make sure to glance at the outlook of this career. Since the incorporation of computers into nearly every establishment in the United States and many other countries, print news has taken a turn to having more articles published online versus print. But, this doesn't mean that print is going out of style. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there is expected to be little change in employment through 2016. Competition will continue to be strong as new styles of writing and new standards are introduced. If the journalist is a recent college graduate, the BLS suggests looking for jobs with small newspaper companies or online magazines to build a resume. Once a portfolio of work is established, look for careers in the competitive metropolitan area. The salary for a journalist is widely varied. The average annual earnings of a journalist are in the ballpark of \$30,000 to \$40,000. The highest amount a journalist can expect to make in the coming years is no more than \$73,000. The lowest amount expected is no less than \$22,000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Journalism is a competitive field to be a part of, but it has rewarding benefits such as having their work published to a large population, writing documents that present vital information and in some cases, encouraging people to think. By knowing basic elements of technical communication, having a grasp on up-to-date software and knowing the job outlook, a writer can be successful in the newspaper industry.

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## Technical Communication in State Government

*(continued from page 9)*

field will most likely write scientific documents whereas someone in engineering might write a manual on an engine. This holds true in the state of Idaho's government. Interns handle the busy work of the permanent Technical Writers, permanent Technical Writers draft documents for the Head Technical Writers who finalize these documents and send them to their bosses. It is a hierarchy of technical writing that has been proven successful.

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## Technical Communication in Agriculture

*(continued from page 12)*

of opportunity for a technical writer that is interested in agriculture to find a niche.

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# BULLETIN BOARD

Minnesota State University, Mankato STC hosts meetings ONLINE biweekly through Adobe Breeze. Meetings will resume in January. Check the website <http://www.english2.mnsu.edu/stc/web> for the meeting URL.

## WHY JOIN MSU'S STUDENT CHAPTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION?

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New members who join on or after October 1 receive full credit for the following year. New members joining on or after July 1 (but before October 1) pay full dues for the remaining year (ending December 31).

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- Access to STC's jobs database
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- Scholarships and competitions
- On and off campus activities
- Meetings at the Twin Cities chapter
- Hear industry experience from graduates

### What happens at STC Meetings?

Our meetings are productive and informative. We have introduced a new segment to the meetings where we invite graduates from MSU back to our online meetings to talk about what they are doing in their careers and what advice they have for students. There is also a question and answer period! We also plan our events for the semester at our biweekly meetings and would like to hear your ideas! Join us when we resume meetings in January!



STC's 56th Annual Conference will take place in Atlanta, Georgia, May 3–6, 2009. For more information on the conference, visit [stc.org](http://stc.org) or contact an STC officer or faculty advisor.



# ALUMNI CORNER

## Alumni Night

The MSU chapter of the Society for Technical Communication held Alumni Handshaking Night on Friday, November 14, in the CSU Heritage Room. Forty students, alumni, and faculty participated. Gretchen Herrick, David Chapman, and Susan Campbell served as panelists, talking about their industry experience and answering questions from students and faculty.

- **Gretchen Herrick** is a technical writer in the packaging industry and started in at Brenton Engineering in Alexandria, MN and has recently moved to the northeast Minneapolis company of Thiele Technologies. Gretchen works in palletizing and is one of two technical writers at the company she currently works for. Gretchen found that the most helpful skills she learned at MSU were her researching, writing, and communicating skills. She noted that it is important to learn to write for your audience and how they will be using it.
- **Susan (Hendley) Campbell** works for Emerson Process Management in Eden Prairie, MN and is a technical writer. Susan works on marketing, brochures, documentation which includes online and how to help, as well as managing printing and doing press checks. The documents she creates are translated into 19 different languages and are used around the world. Susan also stated that you need to have a curious mind, you need to be able to interview and ask how things work.
- **David Chapman** works remotely for Sycamore Environmental Consultants, Inc. in Sacramento, CA and works to make sure companies are complying with state and federal regulations at a site or project and makes a formal report about the project. David stated, “You get what you put in,” when asked about what he found the most useful from his education at MSU. He continued that independent projects and the proposals class were helpful for him and his career choice.

When asked what type of qualities you would look for in a candidate, almost all alumni present stated that you need to be flexible and possess a willingness to learn. Alumni added that the field is constantly changing in terms of technology and you have to be willing to learn that technology. Susan Campbell added that you need to be able to pick up new skills quickly and be a team player. Gretchen Herrick noted that you also need to be able and willing to work with everyone from engineers to production staff.

Following the panel presentation, the Chapter recognized Dr. Lee Tesdell for his upcoming Fulbright and recognized Dr. Kathy Hurley for her service to the department and to students. Kathy will be retiring at the end of fall semester.

**ATTENTION ALUMNI: Join us for our online meetings! Update us on what you are doing, where you are, and share your career with students!**

## From the Editors

One look at the list of articles in this issue reveals the variety of opportunities available for technical communicators. The front page article demonstrates the areas that technical communicators are normally found in industry, but the remainder of the articles demonstrate we work in more areas. But, when interacting with people who are not very familiar with technical communication the assumption is that someone employed in our profession is a technical writer of procedures, manuals, and handbooks. In this issue of *Techniques* our goal was to explore the broad reach that technical communication has across many disciplines as our society begins to value information as a means to enrich our lives.

We've also added some new things to the closing section of the newsletter. The Alumni Corner is a way we hope to gain the interest of graduates of the MSU Technical Communication

program. If there is anything you'd like to see there, please let our advisor, Dr. Lee Tesdell, know! We also changed the bulletin board a bit. We decided providing more information about STC membership, upcoming conferences, and meeting information would be a great way to add to our growing membership base.

We hope that you enjoyed reading these articles as much as we enjoyed exploring our specific industry interests in the field of technical communication. Our careers are not limited to the scientific and engineering fields and we are proud to know that we can work almost anywhere and do anything we want. The ability to communicate information effectively is the key to the door of opportunity!

*Paul Dobratz  
Paula Naumann  
Katie Tormala*

## From the STC President

First things first, I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Kelcey Woods-Nord and I am your STC student chapter president. This semester certainly flew by quickly—seems like there was hardly a moment to breathe, but somehow we still managed to get a few things accomplished this fall.

First, in order to meet the needs of our continuously increasing online population, the STC student chapter meetings were moved to an online format (Adobe Breeze Connect) early this fall. In doing so, off-campus and out of state students have greater access and more opportunities to get involved in the student chapter.

Next, STC's Alumni Handshaking Night was a complete success! Thanks to Gretchen Herrick, Susan Campbell, and David Chapman who took the time to present. Your willingness to attend, chat, and answer questions honestly and candidly made the night both interesting and informative. It was also an excellent opportunity to highlight Dr. Lee Tesdell's accomplishment of receiving a Fulbright Scholarship and to bid farewell to one of the TC program's most beloved professors, Dr. Kathy Hurley, who will be retiring at the end of the

semester. Thanks to everyone who attended Alumni Night, as well as everyone who helped in the planning and promotion of the event.

Finally, STC members have been busy judging documents for the Annual STC Competition Judging. This year we partnered with the Dallas, TX chapter and were lucky enough to receive all online entries, allowing off-campus students to be included in the process. Things have gone well and we look forward to hearing how our entries fare at the Awards Banquet in May.

That's it for this semester, but I'm sure next spring will be just as busy! Please make sure you're checking the MNSU STC student chapter website (<http://english2.mnsu.edu/stc/web/>) for STC updates and upcoming events. And of course, we are always looking for new members, so if you're interested, feel free to "stop by" a meeting and see what STC is all about!

**Thanks and have a great break!**

*Kelcey Woods-Nord*