TECHNIQUES

Designing the Future of Technical Communication

Editors' Note

The editors are pleased to introduce the Spring 2006 issue of *Techniques*, written and produced by the students in English 477/577: Technical Documentation, Policies and Procedures.

Our coursework in technical communication usually focuses on workplace applications, from designing software documentation to writing grant proposals. Inspired by a discussion we had during class, we decided to shift gears and focus on technical communication in everyday life for this issue of Techniques.

Most of the articles focus on how technical communication can make our busy lives at home and at school more efficient. Issues explored include the use of personal schedules quilting documentation, technical documentation for new parents, technical writing for course syllabi, everyday use of maps, recipes, and more.

Inside This Issue

We hope that the range of topics and perspectives will make for thought-provoking and enjoyable reading.

Wesley Ahles, Anna Hulseberg, and **Nisha Somnath**

Confusing Procedure Documents
By Wes Ahles

Over the past few years of my college experience, I have come to appreciate the ideas inherent to technical communication. Sadly, there are too many times when that ability is lacking in many documents that we use. Although I was aware of these vile documents through my schoolwork, it was not until I took up a full-time job that I began to realize just how widespread bad communication really is.

I work in a company manufacturing facility. Part of my employment includes being a trainer for my production team. I instruct new team members how to conduct the processes on my line. Part of this training is having them read a set of work instructions for each process, which they can refer to in the event of any questions. Unfortunately, these work instructions are of little use. The information they have is not thorough, portions of process information are excluded, jargon is common, and the explanations are long-winded. In short, they are often more trouble than they are worth.

Due to my association with these horrid work instructions, I have become more critical of the documents I see in everyday life. When I read a procedural document, I judge more harshly on how clear and consistent it is. Last fall, I was in the post office and saw a flyer on sending packages overseas to soldiers in Iraq.

The flyer had to deal with how to send packages to soldiers at APO or FPO addresses. As I read that, I could not help but think just what are APO and FPO addresses? What do they mean? There was no explanation of what they were, just some regulations on what could and could not be sent. I immediately started having flashbacks of work instructions and how unhelpful they were. Before my time as trainer, I wouldn't have given the document a second thought, but now it confused me why there would not be any explanation of what APO or FPO was. Why take the chance of confusing people when you can help them? It would take only a few seconds.

Other documents continued to puzzle me. I bought a new Gillette shaving razor shortly after the post office encounter. The razor came with several attachable blades for multiple use. I could not fit the blades into the slots on the razor's top they were different sizes. I looked to the box for instructions but saw none, looking several times only to find nothing! There was no information to answer my question and I had to figure it out by myself. I also saw a flyer for a documentary that was showing on campus. It told when and where the documentary was showing, but did not list the title of it or subject matter. I began to think, how could this information be omitted from a flyer meant to entice people to see this film? This critical information was being neglected!

Works Cited

Policies, Procedures, & Processes. "Seven Cs to Avoid Procedure Writing Errors." Bizmanualz. http://www.bizmanualz.com/articles/11-04-04_procedure_writing.html (accessed November 17, 2005).

Let Me Check My Schedule…
By Emma Baumann

You're late. You rush through the hallway, wondering if your professor is in his office. You need his help with an assignment, but the only time you can stop by is now or early Thursday morning. You see his door closed, but there's a big white chart posted outside his office. It's his office hours schedule – a matrix with days of the week running horizontally across the top and hours of the day running vertically along the side. You run your finger down from Thursday until you reach 9 a.m., and the chart shows that your professor will be available. "Perfect!" you think, as you rush off to class.

I'm sure many college students can relate to this scenario. When you're short on time and you need information, an easy-to-navigate schedule is ideal. What do students use to keep track of their classes? They use a grid showing which class is where, and when. This type of schedule can be pulled out of a backpack for a glance to make sure one is going to the right classroom – which is especially handy on the first day of class! Matrix charts are also used quite frequently by many students to clearly display the chores that are divided up between their roommates. These charts show who does what and when.

Marissa Biebert, a junior at MSU (Minnesota State University), juggles school, three jobs, and an internship program. She uses schedules quite frequently to keep her activities straight.

"I mark up my calendar at the beginning of the semester with test dates and paper due dates. That way, I can start working on them ahead of time and visually plan out when I will be able to work on each paper or study for each test."

She also uses a weekly chart schedule that displays her class and work times. This keeps her on track and more importantly, on time. For her job as a softball coach at the YMCA, Marissa keeps a three-column grid of game schedules. The left column displays dates/times, the middle column displays the opposing teams, and the right column displays locations. "This type of schedule makes it easy to see where each game is at and when I need to be there," she explains.

So what makes these schedules so effective? According to *Designing Visual Language* by Charles Kostelnick and David Roberts, "a matrix organizes text both vertically and horizontally *at the same time*" (1998, 228). This creates clarity and conciseness in a schedule and makes it visually appealing. Specific parts of a schedule also need to be emphasized for more clarity, whether that means enlarging the headings, color-coding different sections on a grid, or using different fonts for different items in the schedule.

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…when you're creating a schedule, to lay out chores for your household for example, you have to consider the audience and the context…

This creates clarity and conciseness in a schedule and makes it visually appealing. Specific parts of a schedule also need to be emphasized for more clarity, whether that means enlarging the headings, color-coding different sections on a grid, or using different fonts for different items in the schedule. "Emphasis choices almost always have rhetorical consequences, which you have to anticipate during the design process," say Kostelnick and Roberts (1998, 239). This means that when you're creating a schedule, to Schedules are everywhere. Whether we see them at work, on campus, at home, or in extracurricular activities, everyone is affected by schedules.

Some might even say that they'd be lost without the use of schedules to visually keep track of their day. No matter who you are or what you do, schedules are an important part of keeping life organized.

Works Cited

Biebert, Marissa. Interview by Emma Baumann. Minnesota State University, Mankato. February 28, 2006.

Kostelnick, Charles and David D. Roberts. *Designing Visual Language*. Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.

Sorting It Out
By: William Brozak

In December 2004, the Shipping and Receiving Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato made a large change for the better. To address growing concerns with losing packages, the department went from pen and paper to a computerized barcode scanning system. As an employee in the department, the computerized tracking system has become part of my everyday life.

Shipping barcode labels are the basis for tracking packages. Workers in the department use handheld scanners to scan the barcodes. Data from the scanners are uploaded onto the computer through a docking station attached to the computer. The data then gets put into a Microsoft Office database. There are multiple groups that make it easy to search through the data.

Having a computerized database of all of the packages that travel through the department makes the job a lot more efficient. Packages can be searched for by vendor, recipient, barcode, carrier or purchase order number. The groups make it very easy to view the status of a package that a faculty member on campus may be looking for. Records of packages can be stored for months. This helps the department to quickly take care of any customer concerns that may arise.

"I spend a lot less time on the phone," said shipping and receiving officer Merle Wilmes. "That means I can get a lot more work done."

Being able to quickly locate packages saves people around campus many headaches, especially those who work in shipping and receiving.

Often times packages get left in department storerooms and forgotten about or packages may get delivered. Having the database readily accessible bridged the gap that formerly existed, when people could track packages on the UPS and FedEx Web sites, but they did not know where they went after they arrived on campus. The barcode databases are especially important for departments on campus that receive dozens of packages every day such as Information and Technology Services department, the computer store and the biology department. At the end of each day, the day's records are sent via e-mail to the department to confirm exactly what they received.

Departments around campus all seem to have adapted to the system quite well. When we first started scanning the packages, many people did not like the new system. After we sent out e-mails to the departments explaining it, people on campus welcomed the system. Developing positive relationships through e-mail communication helped build a trust that this new method of technical communication would be more efficient.

Now that the system has been in place for a year, many departments around campus are pleased with it. People know that when they call we can accurately track a package in seconds. As stated earlier, departments that receive high volumes of packages receive e-mails daily that contain the day's record of what was delivered to their office.

"This system is great for tracking all of the packages we get in a day," said engineering department secretary Jean Willaert. "I am very happy that the shipping department is using the computerized system."

Works Cited

Wilmes, Merle. Interview by Bill Brozak.
Minnesota State University, Mankato. March 2,
2006.

The links listed under each topic contain a variety of resources in the form of online tutorials, book resources, and other Web sites.

Resources & Links

Technical Communication Exploration

- Questions to ask potential employers
- How to Land an Interview: Developing a T-Letter
- Computer and Technical skills students must know
- Alumni advice to undergraduates

Glossary & Vocabulary

- Free Online Dictionary of Computing
- Online Computer Dictionary for Internet Terms and Technical Support
- Links to online glossaries and dictionaries
- Increase your vocabulary: word of the week
- 60 words every on the job writer should know
- Exercises to eliminate wordiness

Professional Organizations & Listservs

- Society for Technical Communication
- Plain Language
- TECHWR-L

Microsoft Office

- TECHWR-L Word archives
- Word Template Gallery
- Other Office resources

Usability

- Usability Toolkit
- Jakob Nielson: useit.com
- IBM: Ease of Use/User Centered Design

Style Guide

- Yale Style Guide
- Developing a Departmental Style Guide

(Links Courtesy: Minnesota State University, Mankato STC Student Chapter Website)

Notes Need Boundaries
By Lindsay Case

As a student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, (MSU) I have had the pleasure of copying notes written and narrated by my professors for over three years. With my familiarity of numerous professors in numerous disciplines, I can speak from experience when I say that every professor prepares and presents notes differently. Some professors have learned to do this well, but unfortunately some haven't. When scribbling notes from a screen while the professor drones on I find myself wondering, how am I ever going to make sense of this later? Precisely why I propose MSU initiate and encourage use of a template when professors produce notes intended for class viewing.

... The implementation of a template used when creating viewable notes would do a service to the students and professors…

The implementation of a template used when creating viewable notes would do a service to the students and professors. I have endured professors adding information to their notes while presenting them; often this happens with poorly organized notes. Some go so far as to write new information in the margins or insert it into notes during class. This becomes a particular problem for students because we can't simply insert a line into our notebook. Some of the note formats produced by professors appear to require excessive creativity. A template would guide professors to organize better and allow notes to fit into existing lectures easier. If MSU initiated a template, the University could standardize icons used in notes and eliminate non-standard bullets, arrows, colors, or animation created by computers.

Removing this clutter would make the professor look more adept, and take speculation out of interpreting whether an arrow supercedes a flashing diamond in importance. If a teacher did feel great resistance to a template and was able to show just cause, the University could allow the professor to continue their form.

The students of MSU would benefit from the standardization in multiple ways:

- Easier copying
- Easier studying
- Smoother note transition between classes
- Less time spent deciphering notes

MSU junior, Danielle Krueger, uses notes to study for all of her classes and claims to have trouble making sense of her notes at least once a week. College can be challenging enough just learning subject matter without grueling over notes that seem almost foreign. It's also frustrating attempting to study from notes arranged in an illogical order.

MSU could choose any standardized template as long as they encourage it. I'm a personal fan of Roman numeral formatting, but any organization is an improvement on current standards. To push the integration of the template, I recommend professors be offered training.

MSU could choose any standardized template as long as they encourage it.

To push the integration of the template, I recommend professors be offered training. Good training would speed the changeover of professors using the template versus their own notes and could inform them why the template is a useful tool for them. I'm sure they would see a rise, however slight, in the grades of their students. Even with a template for note writing, a professor isn't expected not to veer off the path from time to time, this is college, but the template would help to keep a majority of learning organized.

Work Cited

Danielle Krueger. Interview by Lindsay Case. Minnesota State University, Mankato. April 2, 2006

Did You Know?

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400), English poet and one of the most important figures in English literature, introduced what can be called the first example of technical writing in English.

His book **A Treatise on the Astrolabe**, apparently written for his son, is now recognized as a competitive piece of technical writing.

Here is an excerpt:

…Lyte Lowys my sone, I aperceyve wel by certeyne evydences thyn abilite to lerne sciences touching nombres and proporciouns; and as wel considre I thy besy praier in special to learne the tretys of the Astrelabie . . . This tretis, divided in 5 parties, wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked wordes in Englissh, for Latyn ne canst thou yit but small, my litel sone, But natheles suffise to the these trewe conclusions in Englissh as wel as sufficith to these noble clerkes Grekes these same conclusions in Grek; and to Arabiens in Arabik, and to Jewes in Ebrew, and to the Latyn folk in Latyn . . .

Work Cited

Chaucer Commentary. "geoffreychaucer.org: an annotated guide to online resources." Chaucer Texts Online http://www.geoffreychaucer.org (accessed April 09, 2006).

LEGOs Sure Know Their Stuff

By Melissa Donndelinger

Let's face it, not many people use instructions. Even better, of those who use them, how many actually figure out what they needed to do by using them? Overall, instructions and directions are not typically people-friendly.

What makes instructions so hard to follow and unfriendly to their users? It is possible that the users simply don't do well with a particular form of instructions. It's also possible that the producers of the instructions don't use an ideal way of "showing" how to do something.

Let's evaluate a couple of different types of instructions and figure out which style works best. First, there are the pictorial diagrams. A good example of this type of instruction is the one used in assembling LEGOs. LEGO diagrams are labeled by the shape of the different pieces and how many dots each one has. The location of the LEGO is indicated by arrow diagrams that show how the LEGOs should sit on top of each other.

Another pictorial diagram is the one used in putting all the accessories of a computer together. Each component is color-coded as to where it should be placed in the back of the tower. For example, the keyboard ports are purple, speakers green, monitor blue, microphone pink, etc. While there are pictorial diagrams that show where each plug should go, a user could simply use common sense and connect the colors.

 Most people open the box of a new camera and leave all the paper still inside. They simply turn the camera on and figure out all the features as they go. The only time they go back to the book is to find out a specific operation.

There are also the written instructions that come in manuals. Often times when opening a product and a book falls out at your feet you don't get very excited to start putting parts together. Assembling a futon suddenly turns from a twenty minute project to a two hour frustrating ordeal. These manuals are full of words, but don't really assist with the "where does this go?" questions that a pictorial direction would show you. Often times those written directions will give some numbered steps, and those usually work, but sometimes they don't seem like they are in the correct order.

So, seriously, what's the best type of directions? A poll was taken of students and faculty members here on campus. Of that poll, 40 out of the 50 individuals asked said they rarely if ever, use the directions. While the directions were not very popular with these individuals, they still preferred the pictorial diagrams. However, as a reference guide, or when assembling a large project, like car parts, step-by-step directions and manuals were preferred.

Overall, people are still kids at heart. They still enjoy the directions that they used as a child. From the survey used, people still like the LEGO styled diagrams. They're simple, quick, and easy to follow. However, they also recognize that at times, more extensive directions are needed, but when not, people prefer the easy.

Piecing It All Together: Technical Documentation for Quilting
By Anna Hulseberg

Katherine Durack writes that women are "largely absent" from the "recorded disciplinary past" of technical communication, in part because their work has been historically associated with the household, which is not considered an important setting for technical communication (2004, 36). In order to help fill some of the gaps in this history, I examined quilting, a field in which women are key creators and users of technical communication for everyday use. As Robert Shaw argues, "women have defined quiltmaking, set its standards, outlined its parameters, and judged its accomplishments" (1995, 9).

Technical documentation for quilting goes back centuries. In the 1800s, Minnesota women learned about quilt patterns from new settlers by "seeing new quilts and copying them," since patterns "were not printed with any frequency until after 1900" (MQP 2005, 118). Patterns appeared in women's magazines, and beginning in the 1890s, they were available for a dime with the purchase of yard goods from the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs (MQP 2005, 118). Quilters also shared documentation through letters: "a relative or friend might send a scrap of fabric from a quilt she was making and include a sketch of the block she was using" (MQP 2005, 118).

The quilting industry developed throughout the 1900s. Stearns and Foster Company "became a potent force in the promotion of quilting in 1928 when it decided to change the packaging of its cotton batting to include patterns on the inside of the wrappers" (MQP 2005, 176-77). Women such as Marie Webster played a leading role in the industry.

The "twentieth century's first trendsetting designer," she owned a mail-order quilt design business and published the first book about American quilting in 1915 (MQP 2005, 176).

Quilting is a thriving industry today. In 2003, one in seven American households had a quilter, and the average quilter spent nearly $2,000 annually on the hobby (MQP 2005).

According to Shaw, "quilt teaching has become a mini-industry in its own right and dozens of well-known quiltmakers earn a large portion of their income traveling and teaching classes. Teachers are usually known through their books, which often focus on a particular type of quilt or approach to quiltmaking" (Shaw 1995, 101). These books require high-quality documentation to instruct in the intricacies of quilting.

To learn more about technical communication for quilting, I interviewed my co-worker Diane, an avid quiltmaker. She considers quilting to be both a creative outlet and a means to produce handmade gifts for family and friends.

Quilting documentation has come a long way since the days of mail order catalogs. Diane's documentation comes from a variety of sources, including books, magazines, pattern packaging, kits, and the Internet.

The first quilt Diane made had poor instructions, and after struggling through them, she gained an appreciation for high-quality documentation.

One of her favorite quilting books is **Beginner's Luck** by Minnesota's own Lynette Jensen. Most of the book consists of simple, clear, numbered instructions, with colorful diagrams and useful tips. The final chapter, "General Instructions," is a reference for "techniques that are repeated from project to project" (Jensen 2003, 1), from rotary cutting to quilt backing basics. Diane says of the book: "you almost don't have to read the directions sometimes because the diagrams are so good" (Christensen 2006).

From the women who enclosed quilt patterns in their letters in the 1800s to Lynette Jensen today, women have long created technical documentation for quilting.

From the quilter who ordered patterns from the Sears catalog in 1890 to my co-worker Diane, women continue to use quilting documentation to craft both heirlooms and practical, everyday quilts.

Works Cited

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Shaw, Robert. *Quilts: A Living Tradition*. [New York?]: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1995

How to Find More Time
By Ellen Lawrence

Parents are constantly fighting the aspect of time – especially new parents adjusting to their new life and schedule. Kerri Smith, a long-time nanny, stated "new parents are constantly on the go, but if they use a bit of invention and take the time to make a chart or schedule, the parents reap the benefits by having more time together as a family." There are many ways parents can find more time in the day if they creatively make a schedule to organize themselves. The number one mistake new parents make is forgetting to include everyone in their daily life on the schedule: themselves, the baby, pets, and nannies alike.

According to www.child.com, many parents are struggling to balance time between their family and work and often times feel disconnected with the household if a nanny is running it for eight hours of the day, five days a week. Establishing an organizational chart will ultimately lead to more time in the day for the parents and newborn to be together, and help them feel connected to their new baby.

The parents need to make sure the feeding, napping, and diaper schedule and cross-off chart (a chart that lists tasks in the x-axis and either times or names in the y-axis) is somewhere handy for the nanny to use during the day.

Many times, parents forget to ask when the baby was last changed and fed, but if the nanny wrote down that information, the parents would save themselves a phone call or even anxiety about when to feed the baby next.

Oftentimes pets are neglected when a new person comes along in a household. By including the pets' feeding and walking schedule with the master schedule, parents are sure to remember the four-legged members of the family too!

A perfect option would be to create a chart of everyone's names at the top and certain duties/chores, necessities along the side and make a copy for each day. Once a task is completed, one would simply place an 'X' that corresponds to the correct task.

For nannies, a chart on which one could write in the time, the type of diaper, naps, and feedings would work wonders in connecting parents with the newborn even though they are not there. Parents must remember to place the chart in a convenient place in order to make sure it is used.

If parents use all of these techniques, they are more likely to have more time in their days and feel more connected with their new family member.

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Kruger, Pam. 2001. "A Perfect Balance." Child.com http://www.child.com/child/story.jhtml?storyid=/templatedata/child/story/data/perfect_balance.xml (accessed March 3, 2006).

A Standard Syllabus = Satisfied Students
By Michelle May

It's the first day of class. You get your syllabus and skim over it. The professor reads it to you, explaining some things but skipping over others. You're not really paying attention, because it's boring and you figure you can read it later if you need to. But that's where you're wrong.

…syllabi should be uniform and standardized….

Many syllabi are confusing and/or lack important information. I propose that syllabi should be uniform and standardized. Of course, there needs to be some room for variation - different classes have different needs - but there are some things that should be on every syllabus.

Every syllabus should have at least a rough schedule, a grading system, an attendance policy, and any other requirements needed to pass the course. It should have clear and pointed titles and subtitles, and it should be organized according to an established standard. It should be posted online as well as handed out as a paper document on the first day of class.

A syllabus needs to use technical writing. It

confusion. It should be professional and clear, so there is no confusion. If there are any questions as to what something means, it can be difficult to remedy for both the teacher and the student. If, for example, a student thinks that "assignments due by 12 o'clock" means midnight, and the professor thinks it means noon, this is a problem. This example is a minor problem, of course, and could probably be easily cleared up, but if it happens frequently, it can be bothersome. If the syllabus had been written using technical writing, it wouldn't have happened and everybody would be happy. Except for maybe the student, who still has to do the homework?

Let me give you a couple of examples. Matthew Sewell, English professor, has crafted a syllabus with subtitles "Assignments," "Attendance," "Grades," "Mailboxes," and "Textbooks" in a bold font. His instructions are clear and concise. He has a detailed, two-page Class Schedule. He has also attached MSU's Academic Honesty policy. He has included his website address, and the syllabus is online as well. This is a good example of a complete and technical syllabus.

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Terry Davis' syllabus is very different. He, too, is an English professor, and his syllabus also has subtitles: "Premise," "Procedure," "Requirements," "Grading," and "Calendar." But under his subtitles are paragraphs that say only vaguely what will go on in class. He says, "Talk. That's what we do. We read with patience and enormous care outside class and we talk inside." This is in the "Procedure" section, and it is far from technical writing. His calendar is only dates with blank spaces next to them; they are to be filled out by students as the class progresses. This is an example of a syllabus that could benefit from a technical makeover.

If we could set a standard model for the college syllabus, there would be fewer worries, less confusion, and maybe even less sadness. I believe a world that includes technically written syllabi would be a better world than this.

Works Cited

Davis, Terry. *ENGL 403/503: Selected Authors: Gardner and Irving, Spring 2006*. Mankato (2006).

Sewell, Matthew. *American Literature 1865 to 1965*. Mankato (2006).

No Sense of Direction
By William Pass

I was late. My uncle had expected me to be in Shakopee by five o'clock, and it wasn't until five-thirty that I decided I really was lost. I decided to set my pride aside and ask for directions. Besides, I was low on gas.

I was on a country back-road when I pulled over and asked a farmer how to get to Shakopee. "Shakopee's easy," he told me. "Just stay on this road for like five minutes or so, and there'll be a fork in the road with a green silo to the right. You wanna take the left there, then drive another ten minutes until you come to this big log cabin. Take the right after that cabin and that'll get you there."

I understand this man was only trying to help me. But by giving the directions he gave me, he only confused and misguided me. Ten minutes later I pulled over again and asked another farmer how I could get to a green silo next to a fork in the road.

The problem is that neither he nor I first analyzed the audience; we were thinking in two separate mind frames. I've lived in cities my

whole life and I'm dependent on street names and numbers to get to where I'm going. He, on the other hand, lives in the country, where there are few road signs to memorize and much less change taking place in the environment. He would remember a path much easier by making a mental note of his surroundings.

Analyzing the audience is a fundamental element of all forms of technical communication. In his textbook *Technical Communication*, Mike Markel states that the first step in creating any form of technical communication is to analyze the audience (Markel 2004, 33). Communicators need to get a sense of direction regarding what information the audience needs. Though I cannot place all the blame on the farmer for getting lost, if he had first assessed me and my personal learning habits, he could have given me much more concise directions. I'm not

expecting him to get to know me in-depth, but he could have asked me right away what type of directions I was looking for.

The benefits of audience analysis are not limited to giving directions. A bartender, for instance, can help a new customer find a good drink just by asking what the customer likes. A clerk at a used CD store can learn the musical tastes of a regular customer and make suggestions when new shipments come in.

Most of us use audience analysis every day without consciously thinking about it. When I talk to my boss at work, for instance, I would focus our conversation on work-related topics. When talking to my grandma I would refrain from talking dirty.   The variations are almost endless.

An important thing to note is that audience analysis can only be done by the person or people who are trying to communicate information. If they leave the audience out of the process of communicating, they leave the audience guessing. The audience, therefore, sometimes needs to speak up and tell the communicator what information is needed.

The next time I'm lost and ask for directions, I'll remember to ask for what I need: "directions by street name, please."

Work Cited

Markel, Mike. *Technical Communication.* Bedford: St. Martins, 2004.

Recipes: The Quintessence of Everyday Technical Writing
By Anne Peterson

Ode to a 3x5 Card
Gather the flour and the water.
Stack up the measuring tools.
Set out the bowl and the blender,
And sit down on your kitchen stool.
Rally your friends 'round the table
To savor a marvelous taste.
But, without the 3x5 recipe card,
Will you end up with pasta or
paste?
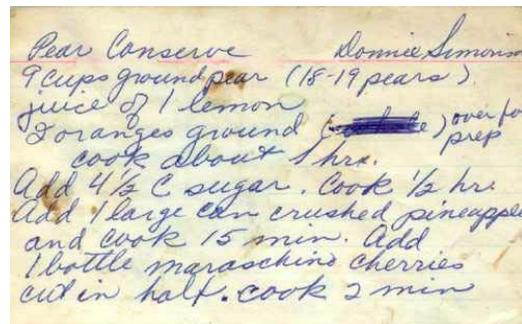
My little poem tries to make the point that ingredients and good intentions alone do not result in an edible meal. Whether we cook a meal ourselves, eat in a cafeteria, or order at a fast food restaurant, the preparer is probably following step-by-step written instructions, commonly called a recipe.

In fact, according to Merriam-Webster, the definitions for *recipe* (a set of instructions for making something from various ingredients) and *procedure* (a series of steps followed in a regular definite order) are very similar.

Eating is definitely something we do every day. However, the traditional, June Cleaver-prepared, family sit-down meal is not what we experience on a daily basis. Microwave meals are more common fare today. Still, the instructions—or recipe—on the back of the bag or box need to be followed carefully to avoid disaster.

Food companies like Pillsbury and General Mills employ chemists and recipe testers to ensure that pre-packaged meals turn out the same every time. We rely on the instructions on the back of a cake mix box as much as we do on Grandma Edna's handwritten recipe for Danish puffs.

Mory Thomas, a recipe tester for the Food Network, explains the process they go through before releasing a recipe to their website: "we brainstorm ideas and do some research. Afterwards, we type up a rough draft of a recipe and test it, which means we go to the kitchen, order the food, and then cook it. We keep testing the recipe several times until we like the result or decide that we hate it and move to something else. We keep tweaking it until we think it's an excellent recipe."

The Big Mac we eat in Mankato tastes the same as the Big Mac in Orlando because each individual McDonald's restaurant follows corporate recipes for food preparation. Sally Colwell, former manager at a McDonald's, explained that the frozen and pre-packaged foods that arrive in a semi-truck must be cooked at specified temperatures for specified times. Each week settings for the grills and deep fryers are re-calibrated to company standards. Each sandwich is built the same way. Because the employees follow the recipe or procedure, we know what to expect when ordering a Big Mac—no matter where the location.

Standards, usability testing, and reviewing are terms associated with technical writing, and they also apply to the recipe sub-set of technical writing. The only difference is that extra senses—smell and taste—are involved!

So enjoy your next meal, whatever it may be, knowing that a technical writer (whether Grandma Edna or Ronald McDonald) has worked hard to give you a pleasant dining experience.

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Finding Your Way
By Alejandro Rocha

One of the many benefits of living in an information age is being able to access many informational services at no charge. These services range widely in both their scope and usability. Online direction services are likely amongst the most popular free online services, but their usability can vary from one website to another. Getting detailed and accurate directions quickly can be a real benefit, but only if they can be interpreted effectively by the user. This requires great attention to detail by the content creators in order to communicate the complicated information in a simple manner. Directing drivers can easily go wrong if the smallest bit of information is displayed in an ambiguous or confusing manner.

MapQuest and Yahoo! Maps are two online websites that provide free directions to users. Both websites are capable of providing directions to specific addresses or general directions to a city or town. Once appropriate addresses are provided, the websites supply turn-by-turn directions to the destination. I have found these directions to be remarkably accurate. The directions even include distances between waypoints along the route.

Although the MapQuest and Yahoo! Maps interfaces are similar, MapQuest provides a more usable interface. When directions are provided by MapQuest, the first thing the user sees is a numbered set of turn-by-turn directions with a clear starting point. Yahoo! Maps shows a confusing map at the very top and then provides dull mechanical directions below. MapQuest also makes it easy to expand and view particular parts of the route by clicking a highly visible link at the end of each row. Although Yahoo! Maps provides this functionality, the link is not noticeable and details can only be seen for the entire route, not individual parts.

The user must be careful when using the directions of either service. Although both services provide printable directions, they are not meant to be used while driving. The user should study the directions carefully before departing and should stop at a safe place if the directions need to be accessed. In either case, the usability of the direction services is very good, but they must be adhered to very closely since drivers will have to find their way back on their own if they miss a waypoint.

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Technical Tackling

By Lucas Russell

With the advent of the information super highway, a once obscure hobby has now become much more mainstream. In the last several years, major companies have developed websites that make fantasy football more accessible to the leisure hobbyist. The addition of this wealth of information that these providers receive from the NFL statistics databases has caused another problem: information overload. Now instead of people picking the names of players they recognize, they have years of statistics and game summaries to sift through. Technical writing techniques can help a person organize this mountain of information into a fun and usable document before draft day.

Not all leagues are created equal. Before you can decide on a drafting strategy you need to find out what your league's scoring system is. The fantasy football website that your team is part of should have a section about the "rules" that your league follows. These "rules" will tell you what your players will earn points for. Fantasy Insights notes that there are six basic scoring systems, eight in more advanced leagues, and at least 38 more optional variables that can be set. The best way to determine which positions will earn you the most points is to either ask someone who has been in your league for a few years or do some math. When drafting, you will want to use your early draft picks for the top players in positions. Make a list of each position you need to fill and in order of importance, as discussed above.

Make sure you have lines for every position you need to fill on your team; you will most likely have multiple people at certain positions, and you should consult your league rules page carefully.

On your league home page you should be able to find links to player rankings. Print the rankings pages from you league homepage and then consult two to three other websites for their rankings. Check the lists carefully and note all discrepancies between them. If a player is more than four positions away from the average points on your lists do a more in-depth search. Most fantasy football websites should have more detailed descriptions of the players. Make sure to place special markings next to any player that you think is a bad pick. Print a final clean list and rank each player to what you have determined is the best order to pick. Do this with each position on your roster, only once. Now go to the NFL's website and find a copy of the bye week list for the season. Write the bye weeks next to each player on your master rank list. This is extremely important because if you pick all of your players in one position with the same bye week, you will have no one to play that week and you will earn no points.

Have your entire list of players neatly typed and easy to read. Make sure to highlight any important information so that it stands out. You will have compiled a list of close to 100 players if you have done your research thoroughly. Draft day will be hectic and confusing. Most leagues use a timer of two to five minutes per pick and you will have to balance your time between marking off players that have already been taken and deciding on who you want to select next.

Having a clear list and strategy will keep you from making snap bad decisions and passing up players others have missed.

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User-Focused Websites: Channeling Intelligent Technical Communication
By Nisha Somnath

You are the last one to join your technical communication course. The class is already a week ahead of you. You login to join your class chat and things bounce off without even nanoscopically touching your head. You despair, fret, and curse everyone you have ever come across. Determined to change the existing sad scenario you decide to get hold of the course book right away and log on to the Amazon website. Within a few clicks, you not only find your book, but also some book recommendations, some of which look interesting. You like a certain book but do not have the money to buy it now, so what do you do? You add it to your 'Save it for Later' list. Next, you decide to check out. You enter your credit card details and voila! You are done! In five minutes flat, you not only find the book you want at a reasonable price and find some additional books of interest, but also do a secure Web transaction.

I remember years back when my parents bought me my first computer. Buying things online was a scary thought. Google was yet to be born and Internet searching was not as much fun as it is now. Even though there were a lot of websites and e-commerce domains, none of the websites were user-friendly; they were 'workable' rather than 'usable'. Back then; the Web was new and so delighting that its content didn't matter. Anyone could build a website, and it was sheer joy just to be out there. But soon the commercial websites appeared, began to grow up, and continue to mature. Today, the sites are created to communicate, engross, and build enduring relationships. Now they look friendly and nail what the user wants.

Content on the Web is the king and ease-of-use its minister without whom the king is lost. Be it e-mail, product description, news, or an online classroom, the primary effort is to reduce the distance between the instructions and the actions.

Take for instance the Google holiday logos. Google customizes its logos according to the calendar and takes the user to descriptions of the importance of the day the logo represents. It's going a step further to make the user feel at home.

Another example is the Amazon website. Once you create a login and search for products, the site brings up product recommendations based on your previous searches. Unlike in the past, the most visited sites today are not cluttered with flash popups, blaring music, and tons of graphics. They are conservative in design and modernistic in content and presentation.

Earlier, the whole Web was divided into small portals and you had to visit specific websites to get information. Today, websites are coming up with new ways to promote successful communication. One example is Google Webclips. It's a thin headline strip that displays a stream of news headlines at the top of your e-mail. A user can select from a list of news sources to display. Now, is that user-friendly or what!

The world is shrinking. It is all right there, at our fingertips. Websites are coming up with new ways of supporting successful communication and user experiences. We have not yet discovered all of the techniques for successful communication.

New techniques will be found, and the ones described here will evolve as new methods are invented and user knowledge and skills change. Until then, let us, the budding technical communicators, join in the effort to keep moving the Web and other arenas of technical communication toward the new, higher bar for usability.

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MSU Student Chapter
Department of English
Minnesota State University, Mankato
230 Armstrong Hall
Mankato, MN 56001