Title: What Do Technical Communicators Need to know about Information Design?

Author: Karen Schriver (386-423)

In this section, Schriver makes several important points about design in the field of professional and technical writing. As a professional writer, the most important task in our work may appear to be understanding a subject enough to explain to someone else. While this is essential to understand what is being communicated, it is extremely important to analyze how it is being communicated. This is where "information design" comes into play. This article defines information design as "the art and science of integrating writing and design so that people can use content in ways that suit their personal goals."

Personally, I think of myself as an artist. Many elements of good information design are also elements of good design in general. Composition, contrast and balance are all important features to pay attention to when designing creative content, as well as professional documents. Every decision that is made while designing information revolves around where the eye is drawn. For example, information grouping is essentially the same thing as plotting composition for a piece of art. The writer must decide where on the page(s) information should be places so that the eye is drawn through the content in a logical order. Even decisions such as font choice are vitally important to successful design. No matter how interesting or important the content may be, if the typeface is illegible or aesthetically upsetting, the document will likely be unsuccessful.

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Keywords: information design, organization, type, relationships, structure

We are introduced to Miguel, a professional writer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Miguel is faced with a task to create a series of documents as well as a flyer about topics such as healthy eating, obesity, and natural cures. This task requires that Miguel not only be well-versed in these topics, but that he is capable of presenting this information in an effectively designed matter. Schriver discusses several important principles that apply to information design, such as grouping of information, visual organization of content, and signaling structural relationships.

Title: What Is The Future of Technical Communication?

Author: Brad Mehlenbacher (187-211)

To say that we are a technology-driven society would be an understatement. Technology is constantly building, shaping, and changing the world we live in. This poses an interesting challenge to technical writers living in the 21st century. In the past, technical writing meant writing exclusively for print. Today, however, there are dozens of platforms to consider, such as laptop computers, tablets, and smartphones. It is our job as technical communicators to make information that is not only accessible but also adaptable to a variety of interfaces.

I am not the most well-versed in technology. Personally, I find technology to be somewhat unsettling, and prefer the concrete, physical realm of print in regards to written content. In this section, it is mentioned that one of the main problems with technical communication is that documents are generated in "ill-structured, unstable domains". This means that content needs to be easily adaptable, as it may not last long on only one platform.

One thing I found interesting in this section is the idea of "wicked problems". Wicked problems are those that are complex, and may not have well-defined end points, correct or incorrect solutions. As technical communicators, we will be faced with wicked problems as technology continues to progress. We are part of what paves the path for this development, so it is unlikely that there will be clearly defined guidelines as we continue to produce content. Therefore, much of the future of technical communication relies heavily on the involvement and understanding of developing technology. It is enormously important as a technical writer to constantly seek knowledge about this rapidly changing field, as there will always be new information.

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Keywords: modern, problem-solving, technology, development

Mehlenbacher provides insight on the rapidly changing field of technical writing in 'What Is The Future of Technical Communication?' First, he discusses the problems with technical communication, including facing problems with difficult-to-identify beginnings and endings. Additionally, he discusses the problems that come with creating content that can be accessed immediately for a society with a shrinking attention span and an expanding variety of information platforms. Most importantly, this section explains the key principle of continuous investigation and understanding of problem solving in the 21st century. In an ever-expanding field, there is no such thing as an "expert".

Title: What Are the Work Patterns of Technical Communication?

Author: William Hart-Davidson (50-71)

In this section, I was able to establish a clearer understanding of what exactly a technical communicator does throughout their workday. Davidson discusses three primary work patterns that emerge in technical communication. The first is information design, relating back to what Karen Schriver had to say in 'What Do Technical Communicators Need To Know About Information Design?' This work pattern describes the act of designing how information is organized, and how it may be accessed via multiple platforms. The second work pattern is working as a user advocate. Initially, I had not considered this pattern when imagining the work flow of a technical communicator. Working as a user advocate involves ensuring usability of a product and making sure that the user's needs are met. The last work pattern discussed in this section is "working as stewards of writing activity in organizations". This means that it is the job of a technical writer to ensure that the content produced by the organization is well-supported and successful. I thought that these work pattern descriptions were extremely helpful in visualizing the work flow of a technical communicator, as well as providing mental check points to consult while developing content.

For example, one piece of advice that I found to be very fruitful from the explanation of the second work pattern is to not only "know your audience", but to consider, "no, your audience". Technical writing is unique in that it is primarily geared towards user interests. This piece of advice serves as an excellent reminder to consider the user's experience in every decision that I make.

APA Citation: Hart-Davidson, W. (2013). What Are the Work Patterns of Technical Communication? In *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* (pp. 50-71). Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.

Keywords: information design, user advocacy, content management, community management

William Hart-Davidson introduces the three main work patterns of a technical communicator: information design, user advocacy, and community / content management. While tasks may vary from job to job (such as they do for technical writer, Elena, in this section), these work patterns should serve as a helpful guide for technical communicators facing a variety of challenges. Writing, while playing a vital role in technical communication, is not always a technical communicator's main focus. "[Technical writers] routinely contribute directly to the most valuable aspects of a company's business…" Hart-Davidson explains. This section provides insight on how to manage tasks such as increasing efficiency and reducing errors as a technical communicator.

Title: What Do Technical Communicators Need to Know about Writing?

Author: Ann Blakeslee & Gerald Savage (362-382)

In this section, we are offered a six-point heuristic to examine when writing content. I enjoyed this section because it provided helpful insight to not only my work as a technical communicator, but also as a creative writer. One thing I found to be particularly interesting is assessing one's audience and the "genre". In creative writing, gene would be subjects such as poetry and fiction. However, in technical writing, genre may be much more specific and specialized. Genre ties in closely with defining the audience of the content. Thus, as a technical communicator, to be well-versed in many genres for many different audiences. Since information and technology are constantly evolving, this means that the genre and audience change as well. In addition to being well-versed in these disciplines, it is important that we, as technical communicators, are also easily adaptable so as to become well-versed in other genres as well.

I also thought it was interesting to examine the personal traits and qualities that are to be considered. For example, it is important to consider who we might be writing alongside, and how adaptable we will need to be in our writing. As a creative writer, I write exclusively on my own, and do not have experience writing with a team. I had not considered how important interpersonal skills may be in a career as a technical writer, but I feel that through this heuristic, I have a much clearer idea of what my writing duties may consist of in the future.

APA Citation: Blakeslee, A., & Savage, G. (2013). What Do Technical Communicators Need to Know about Writing? In *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* (pp. 362-382). Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.

Keywords: writing, skills and knowledge, genres, strategies, traits and qualities

Blakeslee & Savage provide a six-point heuristic in regards to the writing process in the field of technical communication. These points include assessing the amount of time that will be spent writing, the nature of writing, genres and rhetorical strategies, approaches and processes for writing, and personal traits and qualities. In addition to this heuristic, we are introduced to Siena, a new member of an experienced writing team. Through this heuristic, Siena may approach her work from many different angles, and be successful in her writing.

Title: How Can Technical Communicators Work in an Ethical and Legal Manner?

Author: J. Blake Scott (213-234)

Laws and ethics might not be the first disciplines that come to mind when considering the field of technical communication. However, after reading this section, it is clear that a very important aspect of this career is to communicate information in an ethical and legal manner. After all, the public relies on technical communicators to present accurate and straightforward information from larger organizations. For example, it can be very tricky to handle some tasks presented by organizations such as pharmaceutical companies. The text provides a series of guiding questions to aid in facing ethically or legally questionable challenges. For example, a technical communicator should consider their obligations to the client and to the employer. However, they should also think critically about possible conflicting morals or values.

In the fictional scenario, a group of technical communicators is faced with an ethical dilemma. Vaccitech, a vaccine company, asks the group to omit the information that states the age range for which the vaccine is safe, because people outside of that age range make up a large portion of would-be consumers. However, the vaccine has not been proven to be safe for people in this age range. The group then has to decide if they have an ethical obligation to the public and therefore not omit the information, or if they have an obligation to do what the client asks, therefore omitting it. Making possible life or death decisions is not what I imagined would come from a career as a technical communicator, so I am thankful for the guiding questions that are included in the text.

APA Citation: Blake Scott, J. (2013). How Can Technical Communicators Work in an Ethical and Legal Manner? In *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* (pp. 213-234). Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.

Keywords: principles and laws, engagement, perspectives, inquiry, negotiation, deliberation

In this section we are introduced to Angela Williams, the head technical communicator of a firm called BioTech. It is the responsibility of her and her team to design and organize information for their clients, Vaccitech and MegaPharm, two pharmaceutical companies. However, when the client proposes that Angela's team produce deceiving content, we must think critically about the ethical and legal obligations of a technical communicator. Scott provides a heuristic of guiding thoughts to aid in such a dilemma, such as considering the consequences of unethical practices, as well as what obligations one has to one's client or employer.

Title: How Can Rhetoric Theory Inform the Practice of Technical Communication?

Author: James E. Porter (125-141)

"Theory" might not be among the key terms that come to mind when considering the field of technical communication. However, I thought it was interesting to consider theory as a useful tool in technical communication. Theorizing is essentially just putting two and two together, or connecting the dots. This is an important to skill to have as a technical communicator; to be able to think critically and logically about the content that is being produced.

Rhetoric theory can be very useful in technical writing because it encourages us as communicators to think more in depth about every decision we make. We can use rhetoric theory to draw connections and further our understanding of events, documents, processes, programs, and even other people. This is helpful not only in creating and developing new content, but in evaluating and revising existing content as well.

One specific example I found to be particularly interesting is a theory of the DEPAA heuristic, particularly the theory of ethos. As a creative writer, my ethos, or identity, is my own voice. However, I had not considered an ethos in the realm of technical communication. However, this theory draws the conclusion that I am, in fact, still presenting an ethos, it just isn't my own. The ethos that is presented in technical communication is the identity of the company. It is therefore extremely important to contemplate this theory while creating content, as it serves as the voice of the company.

APA Citation: Porter, James E. (2013). How Can Rhetoric Theory Inform the Practice of Technical Communication? In *Solving Problems in Technical Communication* (pp. 125-141). Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.

Keywords: theory, usefulness, views, practice

In Porter's 'How Can Rhetoric Theory Inform the Practice of Technical Communication?' he discusses a heuristic based on rhetoric theory that can be applied to a wide range of technical communication based tasks. Porter suggests that we think critically and theoretically on this heuristic when creating and revising content in the realm of technical communication. Porter describes a scenario where Max, a technical communicator, is responsible for multiple facets of a particular project, and seems to be running into recurring problems. In this section, we discover how Max may be able to be solve these problems through logical theorizing and critical thinking.