

CERTIFICATION WATCH

The Debate Over Certification of Technical Communicators Continues

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INTRODUCTION

What is a technical writer/communicator?¹ Who are technical writers? How do employers know if someone is qualified to do technical writing? And how do technical writers compare themselves?

Technical writers wear many hats and come from different walks in life. Some move into technical writing as an extension of their current career and have to learn the writing aspect of being a technical writer – the engineering technician who starts documenting software; the geologist who prefers writing environmental impact statements; the business executive who becomes the author of many business reports. Other people gravitate toward technical writing because of their ease with the written word; those people learn the technology after the fact.

Is there a way to compare technical writers? How does an employer know if someone is, in fact, a technical writer? How do technical writers rate themselves as compared with other technical writers? Extensive interviewing and portfolio review is one way to determine if someone is qualified to be a technical writer. A certification exam would another way to rate technical writers.

Let's explore just what it means to be a technical writer and what qualifications are needed. We'll then discuss certification and what it means or could mean to technical writers.

WHO OR WHAT ARE TECHNICAL WRITERS?

So, you call yourself a technical writer (or technical communicator, as some prefer today)? Or maybe you want to become a technical writer? On what do you base this title? Is it that you write (or want to write) for a living? About business-oriented or technical things? For a hi-tech company? By what standards do you judge yourself and others who also claim to be “technical writers”? These questions seem, on one hand, fairly easy to answer, and on the other hand, very complex without easy answers.

Some Definitions and Explanations

What is a technical writer? Here are some definitions that explain it in simple terms:

What they do: Technical writers present scientific & technical information in language that is easier to understand.

Specializations include: Industries like computers (hardware and software), health care, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and/or manufacturing

Preferred education: Bachelor's degree

¹ The terms “technical writer” and “technical communicator” will be used here interchangeably. There is some argument as to whether the two titles *are* interchangeable or whether the term “writer” should be used at all, but for purposes of our discussion here, we will use them as similar titles for the same position.

Certification & licensing: Some voluntary certification available

Getting ahead: Can become a project manager or move to higher writers' positions such as senior writer or editor

Skills: Organizing information, writing clearly, editing, knowledge of software & web design

Where they work: At the offices or at home for computer, manufacturing, pharmaceutical & other industries

Job outlook: Very good

Earnings: Moderate to moderately high

From http://www3.ccps.virginia.edu/career_prospects/briefs/T-Z/WritersTech.shtml

Any technical communicator, however, will say that there is more to technical writing than just those brief definitions and descriptions. Technical communicators write and prepare everything from manuals to user's guides to reports to grant proposals. The general public may look at technical writing as way down on the "must read" list and, granted, one doesn't see many user manuals on the best seller list. But when assistance is needed with the operation of a piece of equipment or software, those user manuals become a best friend. Documents prepared by technical writers are necessary to the operation and assembly of machinery, computers, and various other objects, or even to the ultimate success of a business or non-profit agency.

They write parts lists, catalogs, assembly instructions, training manuals, promotional materials, policy guides and manuals for the installation, operation and maintenance of everything from toasters to software, from swing sets to heavy industrial machinery. A really good technical writer takes difficult scientific and technical language and transforms it into concepts that are easy to understand and instructions that are easy to follow.

In addition to catalogs and manuals, technical writers also develop, write, and edit technical reports and prepare illustrations, photographs, diagrams and charts. They write the text of online help systems and prepare material for the internet. They prepare grant proposals and requests for proposals for various businesses and organizations. And even that is not a complete list. But suffice it to say that technical writers bring complex ideas and instructions to us, in ways we can understand and use.

Qualifications

The skills initially needed to be a successful technical communicator include basic writing skills, as well as a working knowledge of the language in which they do their writing. Specific technical and other job-related skills are generally either 1) lacking because the subject matter of the work is a small, very specialized niche, 2) present only because of prior experience in the field as a result of unrelated job experience or 3) present due to past experience as a technical writer.

General skills include:

- Finding, organizing and analyzing information (often from more than one source);
- Expressing ideas and concepts clearly and logically;
- Strong grammar and spelling skills, as well as editing and proofreading experience;
- Ability to write for a particular audience;
- Ability to work with and learn from others, specifically technical professionals and the ability to work independently;
- Strong time management and prioritizing skills, as well as business sense;
- Knowledge of word processing software (like Word); knowledge of software like Framemaker and Robohelp is desired.

Interestingly, technical knowledge in the field about which one is writing is not necessary, although it can be helpful. This is sometimes called the “technical writer’s big secret.”² When preparing instructions or software documentation, it is part of the tech writer’s job to learn enough about the product or concept to be able to write clearly about it. If the product can be used by a technically unsophisticated person, then it can be documented by a technically unsophisticated writer. Sometimes being unfamiliar with the product is a good thing, so one will ask all the right questions and do the learning from the ground up. A technical writer will never be writing about things she doesn’t understand; she will not write about them until she DOES understand, whether that is based on her own knowledge or knowledge that she obtains from the technical people.

WHAT IS MEANT BY “CERTIFICATION”?

What does being certified mean? *Certify* is defined as “to guarantee as meeting a standard; to issue a license or certificate to.” *Certification*, then, is the act of certifying or the state of being certified. <http://dictionary.reference.com/>

Certification of a profession indicates that a person has completed an accredited program of education and/or passed a standardized test, indicating that the person has a certain level of knowledge in a specific field. It is a form of credentialing in which a nongovernmental body determines that an individual is able to practice a trade or profession with some level of proficiency (contrasted with “licensing” in which the government issues credentials to practitioners). Employers know what to expect from a certified public accountant or a certified legal assistant. It doesn’t necessarily make one person more qualified than another, but rather gives job candidates another tool in their employability arsenal, and shows they have gone an extra step to ensure that their skills and knowledge are at a known level.

² Plamondon, Robert, *Technical Writing’s Big Secret: High Tech Technical Writing*.
http://www.plamondon.com/HIGHTECH/big_secret.html

A Brief Look Back

There is no nationally recognized system of certification for technical writers (communicators). But the idea of certification has been tossed about and investigated for years. Here's a historical perspective on certifying technical communicators:

Date	Action	Comments
1975-1980	Society of Technical Communicators (STC) forms an <i>ad hoc</i> committee to determine the level of interest in certification	Despite data reporting problems, it was determined that 74% of members were opposed to certification. The committee found that there was insufficient interest to pursue certification.
1981	A second study was conducted by the STC.	This time, 66% of those polled favored the concept of certification.
1982-1987	STC reconstitutes the <i>ad hoc</i> committee on Certification and begins a feasibility study.	The committee developed a certification program framework and calculated associated costs, did an employer survey and member surveys. ³
1994-1998	STC Professionalism Committee began to study certification again.	Increased interest led to the creation of formal survey but responses were not positive enough to warrant the time and cost of a certification program.

Although the STC has long had investigated certification, repeated efforts have not shown the consistent and adequate support needed to make it viable.^{4, 5}

³ Essentially, the calculated costs showed a breakeven point of 1000 applicants and the member survey indicated that there were only 932 members who both wanted certification and had the means to pay for it. The committee recommended that the certification issue should be tabled and revisited in two years.

⁴ Despite the history of the certification challenge, it should be noted that the STC is neither for nor against certification. Their official position is neutral. Their objective is to stimulate debate and conduct studies to see whether certification is the way to go for technical communicators. Because of their role in the field, they are the obvious leader in the debate over this contentious topic.

⁵ Interestingly, the STC found that there has been strong interest since the mid-eighties in accrediting technical communication educational programs. Accreditation is a very weak form of certification; if students go through an accredited program to become a technical communicator, at least the level and quality of that person's education can be "measured" against a standard.

Two Schools of Thought on Certification

Will certification for technical communicators improve the profession? Or will it improve the chances for just a few practitioners? Or will it harm the profession by severely limiting who can become a technical writer?

Some who are against certification feel it is unnecessary; that technical communicators can rely on their work product as evidence of their abilities. Those already established in the field may feel that they don't need to take a test, because a test would not necessarily be an accurate measure of their abilities. Others just don't think they need a piece of paper to justify their choice of career. The most compelling argument against certification, however, is that the field is so varied and crosses several industries, making it extremely difficult to develop a test that would or could include all common facets of technical communication.

Those in favor of certification argue that it would help to define the profession by quantifying the skill set needed by a successful technical writer.⁶ It would allow the members of the profession to define the standards for that skill set. It would also establish professional credibility and help to "weed out" those people who are truly not qualified to be technical communicators. It could conceivably help to smooth out the currently haphazard informal learning that most technical communicators go through when breaking into the field. Certification would help to more clearly define the requirements to become a technical communicator by establishing a set of performance benchmarks against which success and failure could be measured.

Why Isn't Certification of Technical Communicators Moving Forward?

Certification of a profession as varied and diverse as technical communications is a complex issue in itself. Consider that technical communicators answer to dozens of titles is the first complicated area.⁷ Should everyone who claims to be a technical writer be included? Or will there be limits and, if so, where will the line be drawn?

People for certification will want to know what the benefits and rewards would be for them. Certification is usually a process that involves lengthy exams and a high cost; participants would want to know what they get in return. Generally, the satisfaction of obtaining the certificate is not enough. Often a more tangible result, such as a raise in salary, is more along

⁶ DuBay, William H., *Training: The Path to Certification*. STC Proceedings, 2001.
www.stc.org/confproceed/2001/PDFs/STC48-000047.PDF; Campbell, Alexa, *Setting standards for technical communicators*. STC Toronto Newsletter, December 1997, Vol. 26, No. 4.
www.stctoronto.org/pdf/newsletters/news1997-12.pdf

⁷ These roles could include Technical Writer, Technical Communicator, Information Designer, Interface Designer, Web Designer, Software Tester, Marketing/Sales Writer, Business Process Analyst, Project Manager, Researcher, Documentation Specialist, etc. Credit to the following for compiling these titles:
<http://www.creativetechwriter.com/archives/000088.htm>; http://www.plamondon.com/HIGHTECH/big_secret.html

their line of thinking. For a new program, the benefits may not always be known at first. The first few certified writers would pave the way for those coming behind them.

There are numerous other factors that influence the thinking about certification, including the cost, legal considerations, a splitting of technical communicators into “For” and “Against” categories, level of employer interest (or disinterest).

THE FUTURE (OR NOT?) OF CERTIFICATION FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS

There are a number of directions that the certification debate can take in the coming years. One, of course, is to go forward with development of a certification exam testing general writing ability and several specialty exams, such as software, user manuals, medical, scientific, general technical, and grants/proposals. Each candidate will take the general writing and choose two specialty exams; a small cottage industry would accompany the program, including seminars and study books (opening jobs for more technical writers . . .). The exams would be revised every so often to remain current and the program would slowly grow and develop over time. All it would take is a committed group and some capital for development.

Another alternative is to do nothing outside of what has been and is being done now. Technical communicators will go on writing, the STC other groups will go on exploring and studying, and employers will continue to hire writers based on traditional interview methods. The field of technical writing/communicating is a relatively new one and is still developing and defining itself. Until and if there is a glut of tech writers in the job market, employers will hire those individuals demonstrating the interest and talent to do the job. As the field begins to grow and mature, it is likely that certification will continue to become more and more important until a decision is made to go with it or avoid it. There are, however, some other alternatives to explore.

Viable Alternatives to Certification

Here are some directions that certification or enhancement of the profession of technical communicators can go:

- Support and development of the existing certification programs: In the past few years, some specialty certifying exams and programs have sprung up. Here are a few:

Board of Editors in the Life Sciences Certification Exam: <http://www.bels.org/>

American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) Certificates: <http://www.amwa.org/>

RoboHelp Certified Professional Program: <http://www.gocertify.com/news/certwatch020101.php>

Software-specific certifications: <http://certification.about.com/library/weekly/aa052102a.htm>

These certification programs are gaining acceptance and support, but just by reading the titles, one can see that they are for specialized groups of communicators. It seems burdensome and impractical for someone starting out as a technical writer to try to take ALL of these exams just to show a well-developed background on a resume. Also, there is the fear that taking a specialized exam like one of these may “pigeonhole” someone into an area of technical communication that they may not want to be part of on a permanent or exclusive basis.

Obviously, none of these exams are meant to be a standard or general certification exam for technical communicators. Still, their existence shows that at least a sector of the technical writers believes in certification as a way to standardize the profession (or at least their niche in the profession). Does this mean, however, that they really and secretly want certification for the profession as a whole or are they content with specialty certification instead? Time will tell.

- Membership in Professional Organizations and Unions: Membership in many professional groups includes specific requirements regarding background and experience, as well as a cursory check of educational background and, less frequently, employment history. Another facet of membership is that members agree to abide by the group’s professional and/or ethical code. One of the most comprehensive codes for professionals is found with the National Writers Union. They have what is titled “Technical Writers Code of Professional Practice for Hardware and Software Industries” as a component of their BizTech Division, which is a group of freelance and contract writers. The code addresses such topics as Responsibilities of the Writer, Responsibilities of the Employer, Ownership of Rights, Bylines, Portfolio Copies, Payment, Expense & Retainers, and more. It is set out on their webpage.⁸ It is like a contract and governs conduct on a number of topics. It is helpful to the writers as well as to the employers.

Other professional organizations for technical writers and communicators could adapt this type of code of their membership, perhaps expanding the Writer’s Responsibilities and adding a section on Writer’s Ethics. That code, along with a check of education and experience, would provide a “certification” of sorts, showing that their members have complied with certain requirements, placing them at or above a specific level of proficiency and ethical behavior.

- Accreditation of Technical Writing Programs and Expansion of Course and Seminar Offerings for Technical Communicators: The area of accreditation of educational programs received a lot of support in STC surveys regarding certification. Accreditation is “the act of accrediting or the state of being accredited, especially the granting of approval to an institution of learning by an official review board after the school has met specific

⁸ <http://www.nwu.org/bite/twcode2.htm>

requirements; the act of granting credit or recognition (especially with respect to educational institution that maintains suitable standards).” <http://dictionary.reference.com>

Accrediting the educational courses has the effect of “standardizing” the educational background of students in the same field. It guarantees that the school attended by the individual has met certain (and often stringent) requirements in a specific subject area. While it doesn’t certify the abilities of each individual, it ensures that, for those individuals attending accredited educational programs, that their education has met certain standards. Accreditation for a specific subject matter is usually developed and overseen by a board within a professional organization in the same field.

In addition, offering more programs of substance in technical writing and communication will allow more people to explore and perhaps ultimately go into the field. It will also allow those tech writers presently on the job to stay current and obtain additional education as their position and assignments require it.

CONCLUSION

Technical writers and communicators come from diverse backgrounds. Technical communication covers a wide range of subjects and includes dozens of different industries. It is doubtful that there are two technical writers in the country with the same background.

With a group this diverse, is it feasible or practical to attempt to certify them? Or will the profession miss the boat by not addressing this subject now, while the field of technical communications is still developing and growing?

There are good reasons FOR: setting professional standards; defining roles and titles; instituting requirements to help take the profession into the future; credibility; setting higher educational standards. There are also legitimate reasons AGAINST: cost; diversity; interest level; legal considerations.

Since no definite conclusions have been reached to date, technical communicators should continue to discuss and debate this subject among themselves, with their employers and in their professional organizations. The profession is relatively new and now is the time to define the roles and set the standards for those coming into the field.

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