Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

Summer 2024

Education and Training

- Making learning easier
- Why training and CPD never get old
- The end of Education

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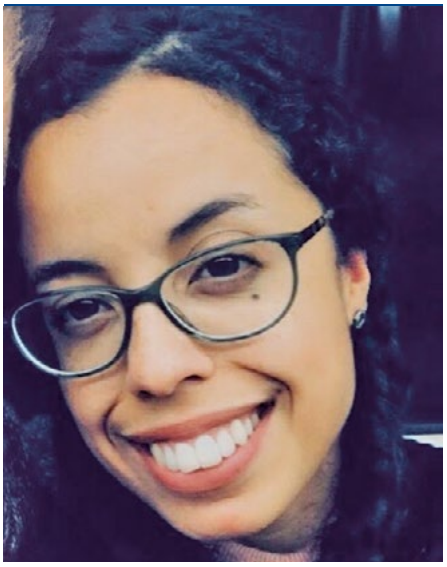
From the editor

Welcome to the Summer issue



Education and Training

Have you been working in the same company for a few years? Do you have a somewhat stable career? Have you been affected by the recent major tech layoffs that are spreading into other industries? Do you feel valued by your employer? There are so many questions that arise when I think about the theme of this summer's issue, Education and Training, because every single professional out there knows the importance of keeping up-to-date and learning new skills that can help to boost one's profile. Continuous professional development, or CPD, is a term well-known to Technical Writers, who, due to the constantly evolving nature of their work, must be ready to pick up on new methodologies and/or types of software quickly. When was the last time you took a new course or learned something that can be useful in your next role? CPD enables you to keep relevant as it 'allows an individual to focus on what specific skills and knowledge they require over a short-term period, say 12 months, in order to be confident there is recognisable improvement within their proficiency and skill sets' (CPD Certification Service UK). Developing confidence, increasing personal motivation, showcasing a timely CV - all of the above can be a good reason to engage in ongoing education. Employers can also not only attract talent but keep their workforce for longer when they offer in-house training, as astonishingly '70% of employees would leave their current company for one that invests in employee development and learning' (Zavvy).

Making learning easier

Banurekha Balaji and Nidhi Prashant Augustine share the details about how you can design training content that is well-structured, comprehensive, and keeps the audience engaged.

Interviewing the organiser of the Information Design Summer School

Communicator spoke to Rob Waller, who runs and teaches workshops for Design students in the Simplification Centre, a not-for-profit social enterprise that helps organisations develop clearer communications. You can find information about the content and structure of the course in the next few pages. You may want to take part in the next one!

Content Design

This topic has been proving quite popular amongst our readership, and this time Sarah Eager brings user experience to the front.

Course and Book reviews

Maria B de la Serna-Lopez, who is trying to switch careers and retrain to become a Technical Writer, signed up to a few lectures online to learn about MadCap features and the importance of documenting APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). Was the course interesting? Can this course help people who are new to the career to better understand the skills they may need? Tanya Brown read a book that was written by Diana Lakatos, who contributed to *Communicator* in late 2023. Did the book 'Crafting Docs for Success' resonate with a very experienced professional?

CPD and overcoming writer's block

Sue Littleford and Rosie Tate, who snapped up 2023's prizes for the year's favourite article and column, respectively, return with two insightful pieces. Sue considers this issue's theme, CPD. Rosie raises the importance of simplicity when writing, as we do not need to overcomplicate things. Do we?

What is Education?

Heidi Staples dives deep into the meaning of Education. What does that mean in 2024? How is the educational system changing to account for the skills that professionals will need in the future?

Regular columns

Dilemmas on Artificial Intelligence, Language on the use of English and Globalisation, and STE Standards on the practical application of the 5Cs - do you follow that practice when writing? ■

Yours,

T. Villas Boas

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CPD UK (2016). 'The Importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)' https://cpduk.co.uk/news/importance-of-cpd (accessed 6 May 2024)

Harvard Division of Continuing Education (2022). 'Why is Professional Development Important?' https://professional.dce.harvard.edu/blog/why-is-professional-development-important/ (accessed 6 May 2024)

Zavvy (2024). '26 Employee Development Statistics You Need To Know In 2024' https://www.zavvy.io/blog/employee-development-statistics (accessed 7 May 2024)

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2024 dates

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	published	8	October
Winter	copy by	24	October
	published	10	December

Back issues
www.istc.org.uk/publications-and-resources/communicator/archive-of-back-issues
(ISTC login required)

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Have your say

Do you have something to say about the articles in *Communicator*? You can share your views on this page, or through the ISTC online channels.

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Glossary

Inclusive Practice Glossary for Facilitators

Sawsan Khuri[1,2], Surshti Patel[3], Kate Baker[2,4], Fridah Mutili[5], Mark Griffiths[6], Nakul Puri[7], Tamsin Kilner[1,2]

Ciaran says

I wanted to congratulate the authors of the 'Inclusive Practice Glossary for Facilitators' article in the last *Communicator* (Spring 2024). As both a writer and facilitator who wants to be more inclusive but doesn't always know how, this article delivered the current terminology to use and not use, with clear explanations and further helpful references built in. I also liked the authors' matter-of-fact and helpful tone which made the article readable and engaging. I hope that this is a subject that we can explore more in future editions, or even have an annual update of the evolving glossary! ■

References

Khuri, S., Baker, K., Griffiths, M., Kilner, T., Mutili, F., Patel, S., Puri, N. (2024) "Inclusive Practice Glossary for Facilitators' *Communicator*, Spring 2024: 14-17

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Omnilingua www.omnilingua.co.uk
PSBT (Polish Association of Translation Agencies) psbt.org.pl

Email communicator@istc.org.uk or get in touch through our ISTC_org social media channels.

President's View

Linda Robins shares the latest ISTC news.

The year so far

This is proving to be an absorbing and fast-moving year in the world of technology. Every day introduces a development with the potential to influence the way we work in scientific and technical communication. I realise there are difficulties associated with the rate of change; also, too in assessing the impact on our respective careers.

Strengthening our community – roles and interests

The roles that we associate with the profession are changing; they are expanding; new roles are being created; the ISTC is working to ensure that we are reaching these practitioners. It is important though that we do not neglect the classic roles; the tools used have changed dramatically over the years, but the fundamental skills are ever present and vital to include in our remit.

Recently long-term *Communicator* reader, Douglas Newton reached out to our editor. An ISTC member (and former ISTC Council member) Douglas enjoyed a career as a technical illustrator in the days before computer aided design. He recalls that articles on technical illustration featured regularly in *Communicator*. He also contributed some of these himself. Now we rarely cover this aspect despite the continuing significance and importance of illustrations to our work. This then is an invitation to you, our readers, to contribute if you can. And if there are other areas you would like to us to feature, please get in touch.

Working methods - the workplace

The speed and extent of the return to the office continues to evolve around the world. The main factors seem to be:

- Length and cost of commute
- Space at home and in the office
- Corporate culture
- National character

In the UK, large corporations and government departments have been pressing for a return to the office for three days out of the five in the typical working week. So 'the commute' is under scrutiny again. In her 'Work watch' column in the Financial Times *(Reference 1)* Miranda Green was considering this for those who use public transport to get to and from the office. I was interested to find that Miranda alluded to Oliver Burkeman's book, 'Four Thousand Weeks (Time Management for Mortals)' *(Reference 2)*. I had mentioned this book in the Winter 2023 and Spring 2024 issues of *Communicator*. The focus of the book is the imperative to make best use of the four thousand weeks (on average) of life.

Miranda Green admits that the commute for her used to be an integral part of the working day, managing emails and reports on a laptop with the railway carriage as an (uncomfortable) extension of the office environment. Following the adoption of new habits during and post-pandemic, she now recommends a change of approach:

- Where practical, start the day working day at home, managing the overnight email in-tray in relative calm and comfort.
- Travel later in the day in a less constricted space and amid more relaxed fellow passengers.
- Use the journey to let your mind roam freely – without pressure and constraint.
- This should see you arrive in the office well prepared to make the best of the working day.

Managing change

Another aspect of the change to working environment is the difference in relationships with other employees; bosses and colleagues; both in-person and remote.

I have found useful material in a book designed for use when an organisation is undergoing change: 'Coaching people through organizational change': Sue Noble and Amy Tarrant *(Reference 3)*. Fundamentally the guidance and worked examples cover changes in the workplace in relationships at different levels and in different environments.

AI – behind the scenes in recruitment and career development

In amongst the plethora of Artificial Intelligence stories, a new book delivers a cautionary note about the effects of use of AI in the workplace; this covers recruitment of staff, assessment of performance and professional development. Journalist Hilke Schellmann's book, 'The Algorithm: How AI can hijack your career and steal your future' *(Reference 4)* is the result of her evaluating the use of AI for these practices. AI is being used, on a massive scale, to decide who gets hired, fired, and promoted. Initially Hilke's reading on the subject led her to wonder about the pitfalls and mistakes that could arise. Hilke went on to develop test cases and to share the experiences of whistleblowers.

From the start of the process such factors are:

- How do we become aware of a job?
- Who gets to see your CV?
- What is being assessed in video interviewing software?

The individual may never know what is going on 'behind the scenes' and may seem to be powerless to influence or respond. But there is an appendix

advising jobseekers, for instance, on how to make their CVs machine readable. There are also useful observations on prospective improvements in design and ideas for regulation.

ISTC News

First a reminder of our tagline for 2024: "The ISTC supports the community of Technical Communicators".

The ISTC Council is focused on developing our community with a reminder of the elements we are concentrating on:

- Sharing expert knowledge
- Building connections between members
- Helping you decide what learning to undertake

As the year progresses, we will be reaching out to you to let you know how we are making changes, seeking your advice for future projects, and asking if you can help us achieve our goals. To this end we are already building project teams to help make things happen.

TCUK Conferences

TCUK24

Our online conference for TCUK24 is planned for Tuesday 24 September. TCUK24 will be similar in format to our online conference in 2022, including the following:

- ISTC AGM (for members)
- UKTC Awards
- Speakers' presentations followed by Q&A sessions.

TCUK25

Planning is underway for next year's in-person conference. At this stage, we are researching prospective venues.

The International Journal of Technical Communication (IJTC)

Our joint online digital publications platform, the International Journal of Technical Communication (IJTC) was launched mid-May. This is our collaborative venture, between the ISTC, the Australian Society for Technical Communication (ASTC) and TechCommNZ. The platform is now available to our members and subscribers; it features online articles on topics relevant to technical communication.

This new platform runs independently of *Communicator*, and we have no plans to discontinue *Communicator*. The platform is a collaborative, inter-organisational initiative, providing an additional resource to participants. There is also scope for collaboration on features and topics of mutual interest. We have some material in preparation now and ideas for future articles.

We are now taking entries for UK Technical Communication Awards 2024. The established guidelines apply again this year. They are open to any individual or team, whether employed, self-employed, contracting, volunteering, permanent, temporary, full-time, or part-time. We continue to encourage entries of all types, from traditional documentation, to those demonstrating technical innovation.

Details for entry to the UKTC Awards can be found on the ISTC website UKTC Awards.

This year the Awards presentation ceremony will be held at TCUK24 online in September. See the Winter 2023 issue of *Communicator* for articles by last year's winners.

Closing date for submissions is 30 June. Please contact the office (at istc@istc.org.uk) for details.

Community

Local Area Groups continue to meet in various forms: in-person, online and as hybrid sessions. We are expanding these groups, and plan to establish Special Interest Groups. We are now making more use of social media to publicise activities and raise our profile.

Professional Development

We are reviewing our CPD framework and our mentoring scheme to ensure that all members can benefit and contribute effectively.

For guidance on our current CPD framework, check the website CPD information for members. It is never too late to start your record. Once you have established a routine, you will find the process straightforward. It is also a valuable personal record for performance reviews and for your CV.

Also, we continue to assess courses for ISTC accreditation. Details of these are given on the ISTC website.

Resources

We are investigating ways to promote the use of discussion forums and a jobs board on the ISTC website. We plan to promote use of these facilities, particularly during this year.

ISTC Meets

Our online monthly meetings continue this year with an interesting line-up of speakers. Details of earlier events are available on the ISTC website at istc.org.uk/events.

Postscript

Recently I came across this quote from the American theoretical physicist, Richard Feynman (populariser of physics through lectures and books): *"If you can't explain something in simple terms, you don't understand it."*. ■

Linda Robins FISTC

president@istc.org.uk

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1. 'Zen and the art of the zoned-out commute helps beat the crowds': Miranda Green: Financial Times (1 April 2024)
2. 'Four Thousand Weeks': Oliver Burkeman: Penguin Random House (2021); ISBN 978-1-70400-1.
3. 'Coaching people through organizational change: Sue Noble; Amy Tarrant: Kogan Page (2022); ISBN 978-1-3986-0702-6.
4. 'The Algorithm: How AI can hijack your career and steal your future': Hilke Schellman: Hachette Books (2024); ISBN 978-1805260981.

Membership

Membership updates.

James Gallagher

I am James Gallagher, a technical writer at Roboflow. Roboflow helps companies integrate computer vision into their operations. As part of my role, I write technical content that shows how to complete machine learning tasks, contribute to our product documentation, and maintain open source software.

On the average day, you might find me writing a tutorial for training a machine learning model, reviewing pull requests, providing feedback on a colleague's work, or sharing feedback on our products with the team.

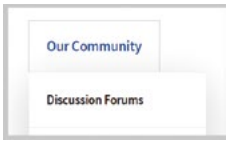
In my role, I am both an advocate for users and for our software. I educate readers on how to solve difficult problems using our software whilst noting what I learn as i write to help inform ways we can improve our product.

In January 2024, I published a book on technical writing, "Software Technical Writing: a guidebook", available for free on my personal website (jamesg.Blog). This book documents what I have learned about software technical writing over the last four years. (Indeed, it is difficult to resist the urge to document your own work as a technical writer!)

Previously, I wrote educational tutorials to help people learn Python, amongst other foundational programming skills.

In my spare time, I maintain a personal blog in which I write about all things programming, the web, and technical writing. I also maintain a website that curates the location of pianos in airports around the world (airportpianos.Org).

I am excited to be part of the ISTC community. ■



Member news

as of June 2024

New members

A warm welcome to all new members who have joined the ISTC.

Member

Adrian Prince	Cheshire
Jason Instrell	Leicestershire
Kat Kent	Conwy
Ashwin Srinivasan	Derbyshire
Alan Newman	Dorset
Denise Edwards	Denbighshire
Eleanor Mowforth	Nottinghamshire
Davy Clark	West Lothian
Gloria Devi Pheiroijam	Cheshire

Entry level

Daniel Symonds	Somerset
Charlie Kelly	Wiltshire

Transfers

Member

Yiu Luke	Surrey

Rejoiners

Welcome back! We hope you gain much from your membership.

Fellow

Stefan Nicholson	Australia

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ISTC groups and online

ISTC area groups offer an opportunity for technical communicators to network and share knowledge and expertise. The groups are open to members and non-members alike and meetings/events are generally free to attend. Refer to InfoPlus for the latest news and events. To get involved, contact the relevant organiser, or istc@istc.org.uk.

Area groups

Cambridge

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Irish

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Thames Valley

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Online groups

ISTC member discussion forums:
istc.org.uk/community/discussion-forums

in Institute of Technical and Scientific Communicators
f ISTC Community

Online presence

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iTunes: https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-istc-podcast/id1345913619

Technical Communication UK

🌐 https://istc.org.uk/tcuk/
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f TCUK — Technical Communication UK

ISTC Meets

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Your ISTC directory

** ISTC Council member*

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) is the largest UK professional body for people engaged in technical communication. The ISTC encourages professional development and standards, provides research resources and networking opportunities, and promotes technical and scientific communication as a profession. To join the ISTC, change your grade, or get involved in what we do, contact the ISTC office +44 (0) 20 8253 4506 or istc@istc.org.uk.

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International Journal of Technical Communication (IJTC)

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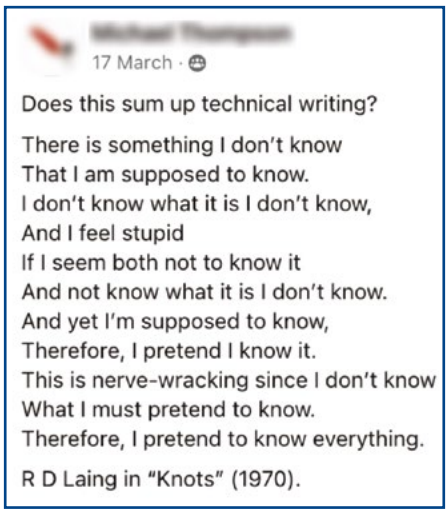
We are all ears!

By the Editorial Team

Every so often members contact us via social media asking for advice and making suggestions. This time we are sharing a dialogue-scenario that was posted in our social network profile; it generated a good amount of engagement.

While in some companies collaboration is strong, in others people who are experts using a feature or product (Subject Matter Experts), may not be open to clarifying questions technical writers need to ask in order to write proper documentation. Some of the ISTC members are seasoned professionals, and probably have been through both experiences. And you? Do you feel that cross department collaboration is productive enough where you work? Do you think that in general, workmates (who belong to different teams), understand what Technical Writing is, and the importance of your role? No Tech author is the only one facing these problems - and some of the articles shared in the reference section may provide more insights. ■

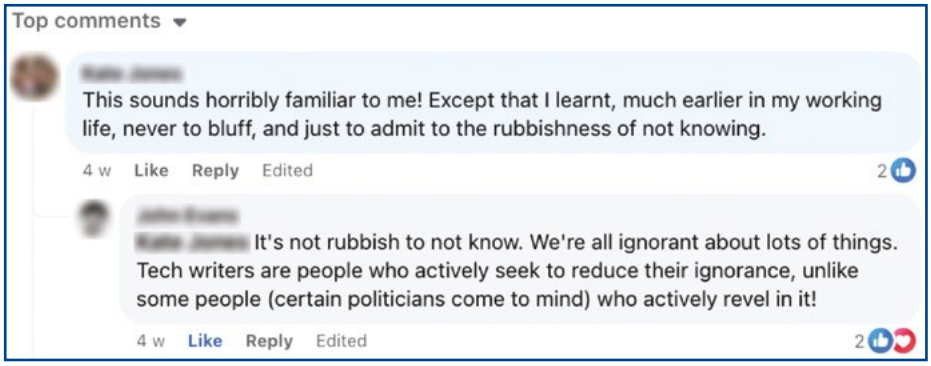


[redacted]
17 March ·

Does this sum up technical writing?

There is something I don't know
That I am supposed to know.
I don't know what it is I don't know,
And I feel stupid
If I seem both not to know it
And not know what it is I don't know.
And yet I'm supposed to know,
Therefore, I pretend I know it.
This is nerve-wracking since I don't know
What I must pretend to know.
Therefore, I pretend to know everything.

R D Laing in "Knots" (1970).



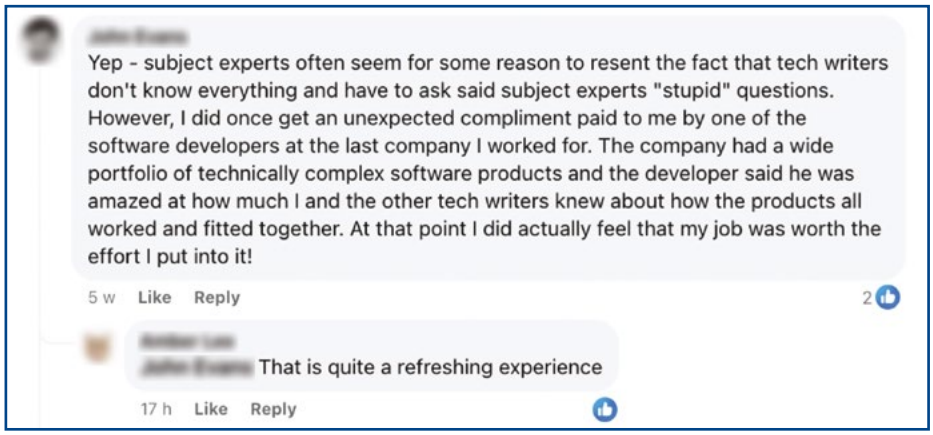
Top comments

[redacted]
This sounds horribly familiar to me! Except that I learnt, much earlier in my working life, never to bluff, and just to admit to the rubbishness of not knowing.

4 w Like Reply Edited 2

[redacted] [redacted] It's not rubbish to not know. We're all ignorant about lots of things. Tech writers are people who actively seek to reduce their ignorance, unlike some people (certain politicians come to mind) who actively revel in it!

4 w Like Reply Edited 2

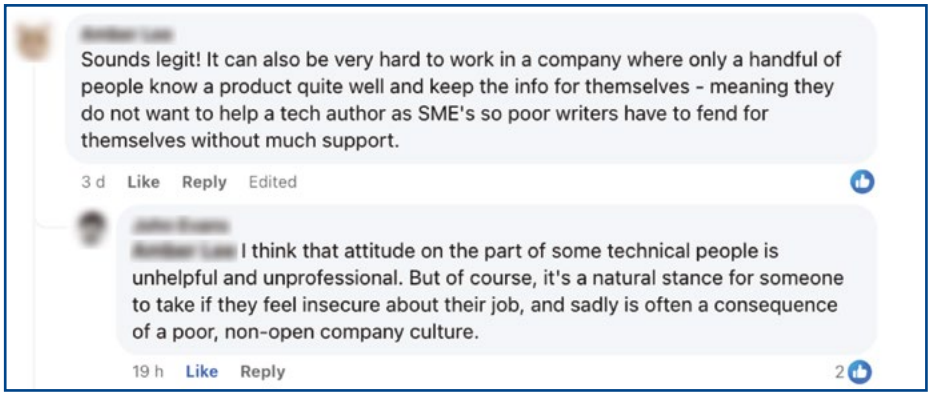


[redacted]
Yep - subject experts often seem for some reason to resent the fact that tech writers don't know everything and have to ask said subject experts "stupid" questions. However, I did once get an unexpected compliment paid to me by one of the software developers at the last company I worked for. The company had a wide portfolio of technically complex software products and the developer said he was amazed at how much I and the other tech writers knew about how the products all worked and fitted together. At that point I did actually feel that my job was worth the effort I put into it!

5 w Like Reply 2

[redacted] [redacted] That is quite a refreshing experience

17 h Like Reply



[redacted]
Sounds legit! It can also be very hard to work in a company where only a handful of people know a product quite well and keep the info for themselves - meaning they do not want to help a tech author as SME's so poor writers have to fend for themselves without much support.

3 d Like Reply Edited

[redacted] [redacted] I think that attitude on the part of some technical people is unhelpful and unprofessional. But of course, it's a natural stance for someone to take if they feel insecure about their job, and sadly is often a consequence of a poor, non-open company culture.

19 h Like Reply 2

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Make Learning Easier

Banurekha Balaji and Nidhi Prashant Augustine talk about designing training content that is well-structured, comprehensive, and keeps the audience engaged.

Learning makes you smarter, makes your life easier, and enables you to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. Learning leads to change in the level of your knowledge, attitude, and behaviour. Is learning an easy process? How can you make learning easier?

Before getting into how to make learning easier, let us understand certain aspects such as why **is learning important**, what are the different **learning styles** adopted by the learners, and what are the **delivery modes** of the learning content.

Why do you Learn?

You learn to acquire new skills for your personal or professional growth. Learning new skills enables you accomplish your goals in the short or long-term, whilst delivering the best quality. With the right skills, you will also be able to meet your responsibilities well within the stipulated time duration.

New software and technologies emerge at a quick pace in the fast-paced digital world. We must keep up with the demands for new skills through learning. In the process of learning, you will gain knowledge, improve communication skills, and practise better time management.

The more complex the topic, the more challenges you will face in learning it. When the learning is made easier, there are less challenges to be faced when learning complex topics.

Figure 1. Learn to develop skills

Learning Styles

Many factors influence the learning style; such as – the complexity of the topic to be learned, the available bandwidth and capability of learners in learning new topics, and finally, the individual's preferred learning style. You must evaluate and choose the learning style that is easiest for you.

Here are some of the learning styles that are, in general, preferred by learners.

Video Demo

- You watch a demo video on how to use a tool or a software application – *visual learning*.
- For example, through a demo video, you see how to navigate through various user interface screens of a software application or how to hold a tool.
- Micro learning is the latest trend in visual learning – for example this could be a short video demo of not more than 3 minutes duration, one task - one video concept.

Listening

- You listen to the speaker and learn about an abstract or a theoretical concept – *auditive (auditory) learning*.
- For example, you listen and learn about a chemistry equation.
- Podcasts are the latest trend in auditive learning. Experts publish short audio files on a specific topic. The learners listen to the podcast on the go – not restricted to any particular time or place.

Touch and Feel

- You experience (touch and feel) and learn about physical law – *haptic learning*.
- For example, you touch and feel objects to learn how hot or cold the object is.

Read/Write

- You read through the content that you wish to learn, make your own journals in your preferred language and style based on your understanding.
- You revisit the journal at your own pace for better understanding.

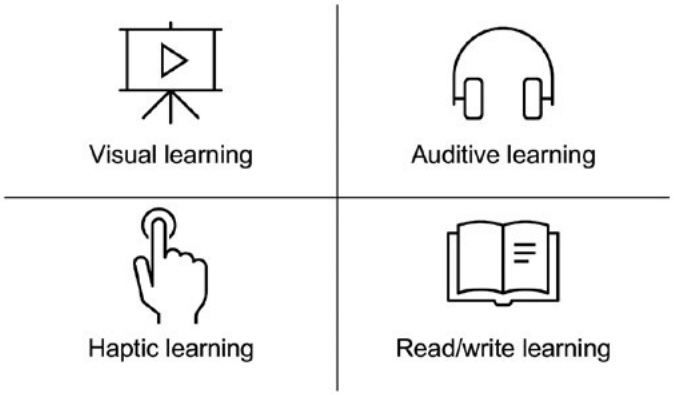


Table 1. Learning Styles

Mode of Delivery

An individual's learning experience can be organized in many ways using existing technology and the available facilities. The two broadly classified modes of delivery are self-paced, and instructor-led. The learning styles discussed in the previous section may fall under one or both of these delivery modes. Both delivery modes have their own preferences and challenges.

Smart learners always prefer to learn more in less time and at their own ease and pace. Post COVID-19, in the new norm of a hybrid world, learners prefer self-paced rather than time-bound learning. Self-paced learning gives more flexibility for the learners as they can pause and replay, and revisit the content many times.

Characteristics of Learning Content

Irrespective of the learning style and the delivery mode, the essence of learning must remain intact – learn a new concept. The learner must feel comfortable whilst learning the new topic at their own pace and be engaged with the topic they intend to learn.

Good information design plays a major role in developing learning content and it helps in making content more efficient and effective for the learners. Developing and maintaining the learning content is a continuous improvement process.

The learning content must be basic yet comprehensive, easy to understand, well-structured, and, most importantly, cater to varied audiences and be relevant to their education background, existing skill set, and capability.

The following are some of the characteristics of 'easier' learning content:

- Creates high impact.
- Engages with the audience by using quizzes and brain teasers.
- Crisp and concept oriented.
- Not every aspect of the topic is covered.
- Designed to provide learners with a bird's eye view of the topic.
- Allow learners to grasp the concepts at a very high level.
- Enables learners to get started with working on a task.

Minka Approach

Creating learning content can be compared to building a house – like the *Minkas, the vernacular houses constructed in any one of several traditional Japanese building styles.*

A Minka house's primary intention is to maximize space and promote functionality and practicality within the space. Minka literally means houses of the people. Minka houses come in different styles and sizes, adhering to the geographic and climatic conditions. It is suitable for a wide range of people, such as farmers, merchants, village heads, and low-level samurai (courtesy: *Wikipedia*).

The process of building a Minka house has the following phases:

- Planning (plan or layout or blueprint of the building).
- Collecting resources such as raw materials for building and the decorative materials for interior designing of the building.
- Designing based on concepts or themes and addressing the needs of individuals who will live in the house.
- Laying the foundation.
- Ensuring proper ventilation and lighting.
- Building the house based on the designed theme.
- Ensuring the construction is progressing as per plan.
- Revisiting changes if need be.
- Finally, bring it to a closure.

The same approach and philosophy apply to creating learning content.

Fig 2. Mapping of building learning content with building a house

Journey to Create Learning Content

In addition to the role of a technical writer, we were already delivering learning content and enabling newly onboarded technical writers to get started with using the in-house documentation tool. However, there was no adoption of the advanced functionalities of the tool. The reason being that the writers were either not aware, or the how-to knowledge stayed with a limited number of experts. To improve awareness and adoption, learning the new features was the only solution. There were pages of information available but no easy way to go through them. That is when we decided to develop learning content for the functionality.

When our journey to create the learning content started the goal was to make learning easier for any learner. We equipped ourselves with the knowledge of learning styles and the delivery mode of learning content. We identified the topic for which the learning content was to be created and the targeted audience. We also decided to deliver the learning content in both delivery modes – **self-paced** and **instructor led**.

The planning comprised four different phases – Develop, Review, Approve, and Announce.

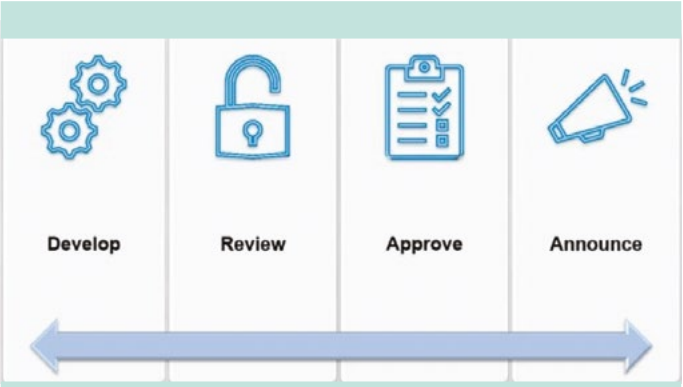


Fig 3. Four phases of building learning content

Develop

In this phase, we had initial discussions with the stakeholders such as the topic owner, subject matter experts, and the training department. This is to bring them all onto the same page, to share the idea and plan for creating the learning content. We also discussed best practices to create the learning content.

The next step was to develop thorough knowledge of the topic for which we were building the learning content.

- If the learning content is about a tool or an application, hands-on is the best way to learn. You create your own sample data and try out the feature or functionality. You can derive test scenarios to evaluate the content in the review phase.
- If the learning content is about a concept or theory, interviewing experts is the best way to gather information and learn the concept.

The next step was to structure the learning content. The flow of the content should answer the following questions:

1. What is the topic all about?
2. Why do we use the topic?
3. Who benefits from using the topic?
4. When do we use the topic?
5. How do we use the topic?

In addition to the theoretical information covered in the learning content, it is also important to cover demos and hands-on exercises. The trainers demo the feature or functionality of a tool or application. The learners practise the same through hands-on exercises with the guidance of the trainer. This is how we addressed the *visual learning* aspect.

We introduced quizzes and brain teasers after every logical group of learning content. This helped learners to refresh the learning completed and self-evaluate the knowledge gained. Also, any incentives for the correct answers boost the learning enthusiasm for the learners. This is how we addressed the *auditive learning* aspect.

As part of the learning content, we also shared and showcased a few references of the existing real examples as that helped learners to quickly relate to the outcome or results of the topic they were learning about. This is how we addressed the *haptic learning* aspect.

In this phase, if the training is instructor-led, we also decided the duration of the learning session and the number of participants to be accommodated.

Review

In this phase we validated the learning content in many aspects such as:

- Is the content relevant for the particular audience?
- Is there a good balance between theory and exercise?
- Is there an intermittent knowledge check via quizzes or brain teasers? This helps learners to refresh and check what they have learnt so far.
- Is the content grouped based on certain logic and are the logical blocks time-bound?

The reviewers included the topic owners, subject matter experts, and fellow trainers or learners.

The topic owner and the subject matter experts reviewed the learning content for the accuracy, completeness, and correctness of the learning content. They ensured that the right amount of information was shared with the learners – not more, not less. They also ensured that there was no duplicated or repeated information from other learning content. They helped in adding the next steps for the learners after completing a learning content module.

Peer review included fellow trainers and some of the learners who may or may not be aware of the topic. They ensured that the flow of the content was easy to follow, addressed varied audiences, and there was a good balance of theory and demo. Peer review helps in understanding the first-hand experience of a learner.

Also, as part of the review process, the commonly committed mistakes were gathered, documented as tips and tricks, and shared during the learning course. This way learners were able to register and grasp the concepts better.

Approve

Many organizations have a learning department which develops and implements a learning strategy for employees in the workplace. They also create career development plans for employees to progress in their careers.

Involving the learning department ensures that the learning content is not too long, and the training duration is well planned with the right number of breaks in between sessions. If the training delivery is instructor-led, it also helps the learning department to schedule the learning sessions quarterly.

In specific regions, there are requirements for approving the learning content. This approval process is taken care of by the learning department. As part of this approval process, we must share the following information with the learning department:

- Title of the learning content
- Descriptive information of the learning content
- Targeted audience
- Prerequisites to enrol for the learning content
- Learning/course duration
- Number of participants

Announce

After the learning department approves the learning content, the last and final phase is to host the learning content and announce its availability for deployment.

We identified the platforms where the learning content could be hosted, for example, the organization's learning portal, digital library, or if it is a generic concept not specific to an organization, LinkedIn and similar platforms can be used for hosting the learning content. We ensured hassle-free access to the learning content.

After hosting the learning content, the next step is to promote and announce its availability. We identified forums and mass email communications through which we informed potential customers of the course availability.

The learners register for the instructor-led training sessions or assign self-paced sessions to their own name. There is still scope for changes and improvements during the delivery of the learning content.

Making learning easier does not end here after hosting, announcing, and delivering the learning content. A regular check on the following helps in improving the learning content and addressing the learner's ever-changing needs:

- Feedback from learners is the most critical one. If the learner's needs are not fulfilled by the learning content, that indicates that either the content is incomplete, incorrect, or not relevant for the audience.
- The content can be revised with topic owners and subject matter experts so that latest changes in implementation are

not missed. This helps the learners by providing them with up-to-date content.

How did we address the self-paced delivery mode?
We decided to deliver the learning content as both self-paced and instructor-led. When we delivered the instructor-led training, the session was recorded. Using a video editing tool, the entire recording was broken down into short videos not exceeding 5 minutes. Each video covered one specific task. This way, learners could complete the training at their own pace. At the end of the training, there were exercise modules shared with them for hands-on use. Later, the exercise results were evaluated, and feedback shared. This completed their learning circle.

Conclusion

We think you all will agree with us that it is possible to make learning easier. Some of the benefits of making learning easier are:

- It creates awareness of the topic discussed in the learning content.
- It increases the speed of adoption of the concept.
- How-to knowledge is spread amongst a greater number of learners.

When learning becomes easier, the learners act as multipliers in spreading the knowledge.

When learning becomes easier, there will be a smaller number of consultation requests for the experts. ■

Banurekha Balaji

With over 18 years of expertise in technical communication, I'm currently designated as User Assistance Development Architect. I create developer tutorials, train technical writers on documentation tools and concepts. I have also been developing training content from scratch for both instructor-led and self-paced training on documentation concepts and deliver the same for technical writers. I am actively involved in mentoring information architects.

Nidhi Prashant Augustine

With over 18 years of expertise in technical communication and academia, I'm currently designated as User Assistance Development Architect. I create developer tutorials, train authors, doc leads, and information architects on various tools and concepts. I also develop training content from scratch for both instructor-led and self-paced training on documentation concepts for a global audience. I also mentor information architects. I also have filed a patent in the field of Data Management.

Interview

Rob Waller talks about Information Design Summer School.

C: What is your background?

R: I originally trained at Reading University as a typographer– a specialist kind of graphic designer, focused on designing text. My first job was at the Open University, which was still in its early days and was exploring innovative ways of teaching at a distance. I found myself in a research institute working with educational technologists, psychologists and other disciplines, so I had to argue the case for why my expertise was important, and how it contributed to learning. I did a PhD on the relationship between language and design, before leaving to start a design agency, Information Design Unit. We developed clear information for many government departments (HMRC, DWP, and others) and service brands (such as Vodafone, Barclays, and British Gas). Towards the end of my career I returned to an academic role at Reading as Professor of Information Design. We started a research group called the Simplification Centre (which later became an independent non-profit organisation), working with sponsoring organisations to help them improve the quality of their communications with customers and the general public. So I have been interested in how design practice is informed by theory for my whole career.

C: How did the Information Design Summer School come about?

R: The idea of a summer school was to reach professionals who have seen the relevance of information design to their work, but found it hard to find a way to implement this. At the Simplification Centre, and in my design practice, I encountered many such people. Just reading a book or website doesn't help them enough, and so the summer school was conceived as a way to help them encounter a wider range of ideas and processes in a short time.

They also benefit from conversations with each other and the three (sometimes four) tutors, who are very experienced designers and researchers. During the week we work on practical projects in teams. The projects are often set by organisations who have given us their problems to address. Topics covered have included information for remand prisoners about their rights, information for hospital patients, and visual information to convey environmental issues in planning applications.

The first summer school came out of a conversation at a conference, with Jenny Darzentas of the University of the Aegean in Greece. We had both been thinking about starting a summer school, and we held the first one on the island of Syros in 2013, assisted by some EU funding Jenny had obtained. People came from many different countries and we had a fantastic week learning together in a beautiful location.

In subsequent years, the summer school moved to the UK, where we used the facilities of Bath Spa University, and then the University of Bath. People come for a week to a lovely tourist destination and work intensively together. We've had people from every continent, and they have included technical writers, civil servants, medics, educators, lawyers, statisticians, and also graphic designers wanting to specialise in information design.

During the Covid lockdown we moved online, in shorter sessions spread over several weeks, and we have stayed that way. We went back to face-to-face interaction in 2023, but we found it hard to recruit enough participants prepared to pay for travel and accommodation. So we are back online in 2024.

C: The term 'Information Design' is becoming very popular. How would you explain what Information Designers do?

R: Information designers would probably describe their role in a similar way to technical writers. Both professions take complex information, and analyse its content, audience and purpose. We organise it logically, write it clearly, and design it so it is usable. The two specialisms overlap in many ways, and differences lie mostly in where the people come from, and the problems they typically tackle. Information designers tend to start as graphic designers, focused on the visual display of information. They often work for consumer audiences, and in a wide range of contexts, including designing wayfinding systems for buildings. They will look blank if you mention DITA, but they probably use InDesign and Illustrator; those in digital contexts will use Figma and similar products. Information design projects I have worked on include museum exhibits, flight information displays, insurance documents, dictionaries and reference books, phone bills, customer letters, and tax forms.

C: What is the main proposal of your school, and how would that differ from other courses offered by competitors?

R: Many training courses are tightly defined in terms of content, objectives and learning outcomes. The summer school is more of an immersion in the topic, and an exposure to experts and fellow learners. It's intended as a fast-track orientation in a new field, which you can build on in your career and future learning.

ISTC member Ann Sharman wrote about her experience in the 2016 summer school: "Travelling down to Bath at the start of the week, I was prepared for a fairly normal conference type experience providing some interesting pointers to use in my daily tussles helping users of our software system. What I got, however, was something much more. The whole week was inspiring, full of interactions that made me look at what I do in a completely different way." (*Communicator*, Winter 2016, 32-34).

C: Can you share details about the syllabus or the structure of the course?

R: We start off by asking people to bring with them examples of good and bad design. We critique them as a group, and this helps us develop a common approach. We use a set of theory flashcards to explain why designs are working or failing – these summarise theoretical models from a range of disciplines. They include very basic explanations of cognitive load, relevance theory, perception theory (from gestalt psychology) – around thirty in all. We then focus each morning on a different aspect of information design, through lectures

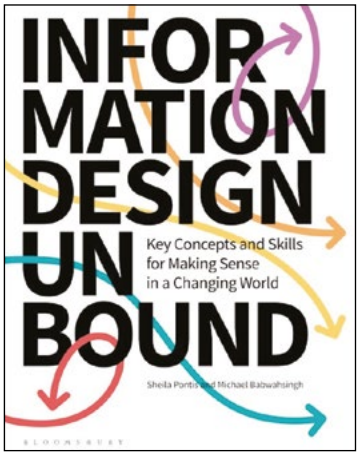
and activities. I cover the design of text, Karel van der Waarde lectures on document testing and iconography, and Clive Richards focuses on visualisation. We also invite each participant to give a presentation about their own work, and these are often brilliant. They get comments on their work, and often leave the summer school with new friendships and working partnerships.

C: What are the main skills your students look to develop?

R: People come to the summer school to get insight into what information design is, and how it can help them in their professional role. They can assess their own state of knowledge and skill, and learn to critique the design of documents. So even if they don't have the necessary technical skills yet, they are able to brief others. They often follow up through conferences, reading and other courses (at least one enrolled for an MA).

C: What is the best book focused on our industry, that you have read recently, and why? The same goes for a piece of content, or a website, that you think is really well-written and well designed.

R: A good introduction to information design has just been published: Information Design Unbound, by Sheila Pontis and Michael Babwahsingh. Bloomsbury Publishing 2023 (https://infodesignunbound.com). ■




Information design summer school

Ann Sharman describes a mind-changing week full of learning, inspiration and fantastic people in Bath, UK.

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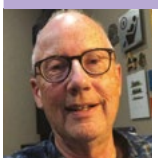
ISTC awards

Horace Hockley Award Winner 2014

Information designer Rob Waller, recipient of the 2014 Horace Hockley Award, reflects on his encounters with the ISTC and technical communications over 40 years.

Rob Waller



I am an experienced simplification consultant, specialising in information design, service design, and brand experience. My main career started and finished with roles in academic research, with several decades delivering information design projects in many sectors, including financial services, legal information, government, telecommunications, energy, and retail. I am now mostly retired, but still doing some work as a consultant to various organisations, and helping to draft the new ISO standard for plain language. I was very proud to receive the Horace Hockley Award from ISTC in 2014.
https://www.simplificationcentre.org.uk/
https://www.robwaller.org/

What does it mean to be an ISTC member?

- Mentoring scheme
- TCUK annual conference
- UK Technical Communication Awards recognition
- Publications: *Communicator, InfoPlus,* ISTC Books
- ISTC Code of Professional Practice

My first two virtual lectures: Designed and delivered by 'OnTarget Communications'

Maria B de la Serna-Lopez is trying to shift into a Tech Writing career. Are online courses a productive way to gain new skills?

I am training to become a technical communicator while working full time as a gas engineer. I am taking an online course of the 'study at your own pace' type..

Recently, I have attended my first two 'virtual' lectures, thanks to the complimentary voucher 'OnTarget Communications' gave ISTC members during the TCUK 2023.

The lectures were on MadCap Flare, 2018-2023, and on Application Programming Interface (API) documentation. The organisation of the lectures, the communication between the organisers and me (the client), and the delivery of the lectures ranged from good to excellent.

The provider

'OnTarget Communications' is a company that provides documentation, training, content management and recruitment services to organisations worldwide, primarily in the Hi-Tech, Telecom, Military, Security and Bio-Tech fields.

I contacted the company by sending an email to a general address. I sent details of the voucher and requested information on when and how I could get access to the lectures. Rena Gillard replied immediately with a clear procedure and details on how to access the lectures as well as confirmation of my registration for the selected dates.

Over the years, I have found that having a difficulty with procedures, or processes or instructions is not a problem as such. It's not that things might not go to plan, that is a certainty and just a part of life. The problem is the response, or specifically the lack of response we receive sometimes when things do not go to plan or when we require further information. In that respect 'OnTarget Communications' proved most excellent in making the registration and access to the training process easy to navigate and painless.

For example, I had some difficulty getting the emails containing the relevant information to enter the virtual lecture. As the date for the first class was approaching fast and I still had no further information or links to connect to the classroom, I sent another email to Rena explaining my problem.

I received a phone call within 15 minutes of sending the email offering an apology and a solution. 'OnTarget Communications,' and particularly Rena, reacted quickly and efficiently. She kept the channels of communication open, and was focused on solving problems.

Eran Yuri Kolber, the Director of 'OnTarget Communications,' designed and conducted the lectures. Eran is practical in his approach to the material and how to present it to us. I find it difficult to engage with people over a screen and keep the interest alive for a long period of time, but I think Eran did a fantastic job by allowing his personality to shine throughout the presentations.

Also, he actively listened to criticism and changed behaviour accordingly. For example, after the first session people complained that there were not enough breaks, so it was quite hard to follow the lesson. Eran restructured the next two sessions to make sure that there were more breaks, though shorter, allowing people to rest whilst also giving sufficient time to cover the material.

The content

Eran split the MadCap Flare lecture into two sessions of 5 hours each. The first session concentrated on understanding what Flare does and why. We looked at DITA as a standard and a methodology, and at how Flare follows this philosophy, thus applying the idea of single-sourcing, and a modular approach to the creation of content.

> *One of the things I find most interesting about Flare is that it does not use a database, but the hierarchy established in your own folders. Flare helps identify topic types and organises them in such a way that we can reuse content constantly. Flare also helps to focus on user goals, and it has tools to enhance the accessibility of content creation and output.*

The second session concentrated on source control. Working from a shared repository allowed multiple writers to work on the same project and simplified the monitoring and control of version management. It is important to emphasise that Flare supports many of the most common source control systems, such as Git and Git derivatives, MadCap central (which is also a Git derivative), Subversion (SVN) or Azure DevOps Server (formerly known as TFS), to name but a few.

The last lecture was on API documentation. This lecture was also 5 intense hours long and I learned a lot about the use of APIs and the different types available. Eran chose to structure the lecture around Web APIs - specifically the Representational State Transfer or REST APIs - as they are becoming increasingly popular in all industries.

There are many factors to explain why REST APIs are becoming so popular. One of these factors is familiarity because REST APIs use http protocols to request data from servers, and most people are already familiar with these

protocols. REST APIs are an architectural style, providing an approach to communication between devices and servers, and it is aligned with the DITA methodology and standard.

In other words, REST APIs offer to companies and individual technical communicators a set of highly sought-after features, such as client-server independence, or a uniform interface which gives the user a straightforward and standardised method for accessing data via the internet.

Finally, Eran hammered into us the importance of documenting APIs. This is done by creating a clear and well-structured set of documentation with tips, tutorials, and best practices. Ideally, the documentation should be beginner-friendly and have clear steps. API documentation should provide usage, syntax, and definitions for each command in a clear layout.

Eran also introduced us to the use of applications, such as Postman. Postman helps achieve consistency when inputting data and creating REST APIs. It also helps to organise and structure their content. Postman also aids to achieve a coherent approach to the design of REST APIs. In other words, Postman is a great tool to create and document REST APIs, and as Eran made very clear, documenting APIs is as important as the API itself.

My conclusion

I would rate the lectures and their organisation from good to excellent. I found the two lectures on Flare were better structured and presented more clearly than the lecture on APIs.

The Flare lectures made clear the basics of the software and how to use it as a beginner. The lectures also demonstrated how Flare fits within the world of content creation when there is more than one writer on a project.

This helped me understand the importance of Flare in building information architecture using the DITA standard and methodology, the relevancy of single-sourcing and how to keep in mind the idea of being tidy and organised, or effective and efficient, when we create content.

The last lecture on APIs was harder for me to follow. I had the impression that we were flying through the lecture without having sufficient time to think about and reflect on all the information Eran gave us.

It may have been the case that the other students were already familiar with the information. It may have been because as we are training as technical writers, and not as developers, we do not need to know about APIs in as much detail as developers do. I would have liked a slower pace and more examples to better understand what I was doing.

At the end of the lecture Eran offered to answer any questions via email. I have not taken him up on his offer yet as I still need to do more work on my end, but I suspect that may be useful.

These 'virtual' lectures have been extremely valuable to me as a student for several reasons, but the most important one is that they have given me an insight into how people explain the concepts and software we all are using. However, to understand the new software, or application, the lecturer gives examples based on the part of the world where they live or work.

The experience brought home the fact that I am learning a new language, the language of Technical Communicators. I am relearning to write and to organise data in such a way that brings consistency and clarity to anyone, regardless of where they live or work in the world. It brought home to me that we are really in one world but with localised features. ■

Maria B de la Serna-Lopez

I am a student as I am changing my career path from gas engineer to technical communicator. I am learning as much as I can about different concepts and ways of doing things and about the types of software available to help me do these things more efficiently and consistently. Finding out about MacCap Flare and APIs documentation is all part of that journey. I am also working as a volunteer with the ISTC website design working team.

Why training and CPD never get old

By Sue Littleford.

I've been wordsmithing since infant school, when I would solve other kids' spelling conundrums in the queue for the teacher's desk. I've been writing for publication ever since, and in my salaried life I also started editing at my boss's request.

I've written everything from technical user manuals, to public information leaflets, to flash fiction. I've answered parliamentary questions and drafted contracts. I've copyedited around 30,000,000 words.

So there's nothing more I could learn about writing or editing, right? Wrong.

I'm still doing training courses, and reading around my subject. In March 2024, I completed a formally taught course on nonfiction developmental editing; in 2023 I did a number of short self-paced courses with the Publishing Training Centre and their line-editing formal course, and attended my ninth Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) annual conference.

I'm at an editorial Zoom meeting most weeks with editors of all kinds, niches and levels of experience to discuss anything and everything related to editing; I'm active in the CIEP members' forums.

If I don't know my job by now, when will I? Why, when my countdown to retirement is already running in my head, am I still actively training and pursuing CPD? Here are my reasons:

1 Because I know I don't know everything

I know an awful lot about my subject, but as you've no doubt realised yourself, the more you know, the more there is to know. Because of that, I make it my business to fill gaps in my knowledge, and to work out ways to apply what I learn. Sometimes I decide not to use what I've learned, a conscious decision based on need and self-knowledge. At least I know now that the new thing exists, and is there, available to me should my needs change.

2 Because talking to other people stops me getting insular

It's so easy to bob along in our own little bubble, always doing what we've always done. I know *Communicator* readers need to keep up with the technical developments in their field, but given the slippery nature of language, and the speed at which English is changing (thanks, internet), do you give the same diligence to keeping up to date with writing and editing, and language evolution? If not, why not? If you do, yay!

3 Because a lot of the best learning is done through cross-fertilisation

When I was salaried, some of the best problem-solving was achieved in those conversations in corridors when I bumped into someone who might have an interest in that particular issue. Talking to people on the same course, as well as to the tutor, can generate some great insights, or simply result in a really handy tip. On a course in 2012, I heard a chance comment that resulted in me discovering I'd been doing something in Word the hard way, and in the years since then, that chance comment has saved me around 100 hours of irritated effort.

4 Because knowing my training and CPD are up to date is a great weapon against imposter syndrome

Going on a course that tells me I'm already doing things right has two benefits – I feel a lot more confident, and can demonstrate to clients that I really do know what I'm doing, because my CPD is up to date. And if I learn new ways of doing things, ditto.

5 Because if I never look up from my desk, I don't get any perspective

If I'm nose to the grindstone, churning out the work, where's my thinking time? When do you take the opportunity to think about how you work, not simply what you do? We deserve a chance to get out of our rut, to discover what current best practice looks like, what new tools and resources are around and what people make of them.

6 Because learning on the job has a limited life

I come across editors, sometimes, who have learned on the job, done that job for years, and then launched themselves into freelance careers without any updated training. I don't get that. An employer does things in a way that doesn't necessarily fly with another employer, or with freelance clients, who will expect the ability to change approach to suit each of them. Learning on the job is great, but there's a huge temptation to think 'I've been doing this for years, and I know what I'm doing, end of'. You know your way of doing things, that's all.

7 Because it future-proofs us, a bit

AI for editing and writing? The idea – and the current level of AI's competence – gives me the heebie-jeebies. But I'm making sure I'm across developments to be able to explain to clients precisely why human writing and human editing is still vastly superior (when it's done well). We need to know how to use our tools, but our tools keep changing. When did you last properly refresh your Word skills, let alone InDesign, LaTeX or reference-citing software? I'm forever coming across people working in editing who don't have pretty basic Word knowledge, so how are they going to cope when the machines come for our jobs if Word defeats them?

8 Because it's savvy from a marketing perspective

When I'm looking to hire someone, I'd rather have someone with years of experience and evidence of CPD, much more than someone with no apparent interest in how their field is developing. Need I say more? Yes. I put my training courses in my CIEP directory entry.

Finally, a pro tip: when I'm at a conference, I make a point of going to at least one session outside my niche. Nothing gets us out of our bubbles like deliberately exposing ourselves to something completely outside our daily practice, and who knows what synergistic sparks will fly?

Sue Littleford

Sue Littleford is the author of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading guide Going Solo, now in its second edition. She went solo with her own freelance copyediting business, Apt Words, in March 2007 and specialises in scholarly humanities and social sciences.

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The End of Education

How playing around is saving the world. Heidi Staples, PhD.

The theme of this issue of *Communicator* is education, but what do we mean by the term education? What comes to mind for most of us likely includes a mandatory schooling experience that begins around the age of 5 and goes on (and on) until at least somewhere around the age of consent.

What is a Model Education?

My daughter homeschooled for fourth grade. During week one, she asked could she research food, and I said sure. She asked could she research McDonald's, and I said, um, sure. She asked could she research doing something about rainforest destruction, and I said, um, no. She came back five minutes later with the same question. I gave her the same answer and directed her to some official coursework. It seemed to me that she ought to get back to the usual subjects before the rainforest thing took over. Yet, as she turned away, my inner voice prodded - what did I think she should be thinking about, if not the imminent erasure of the living world? Where did I get my ideas about what she ought to study?

When she tip-toed back a third time to ask if she could, please, look and see if there was something she could do, this time, I did at last say yes. What happened next would, eventually, change forever how I understand education.

The Work of Education

Soon, she scampered back to show me multiple reputable land trusts set up by internationally eminent biologists and conservationists, such as E.O. Wilson and Jane Goodall. For the next 2 years or so, she played her fiddle for donations on city street corners, mailed her thousands of dollars of earnings – no joke – and helped save hundreds and hundreds of biodiverse rainforest acres. It was pretty amazing.

I know I said this forever changed how I see education. Honestly, the experience came in more as a flashing eye floater than full blown revelation. Consolidating the transformation took years and further parental blunders. In fact, that first request was the moment I could have awakened, understood what bell hooks meant when she wrote "education is freedom." Instead, I led with that no, and later returned there, negating her engagement again with the thought that following your heart was all fine for elementary school - but the time comes to get serious, and so, my daughter got a scholarship to one of the top private schools in the southeastern United States – and she buckled down. Education of this sort can mean more scholarships, more career paths, more money. It also means closed doors and shuttered windows. It means blocking out the beckoning wild. It means full-on hum and harrow of fluorescent lights illuminating required standardized texts laid out on hard desk-tops cut to fit around your pliant torso and bar your exit on one side, along with a cultivated internal numbing that teeters between attention and sleep. It also means that around a year and a half in, she refused, leaving school at 13.

Reader, I won't say more about the fraught measures a parent might roll out to get their only child to attend junior high - the cajoling, bribing, and coercing that could ensue, nor will I detail the brooding exchanges a couple might engage in. I can tell you she stayed home – where she used modern technology to merrily teach herself several languages, dabble in philosophy, and ace the SAT.

I now know the education my daughter refused arose from what its critics describe as the "Prussian model" – a nationalist mandatory educational system from the 1700s with which the European and American state-run educational systems align. The Prussian system initiated state-run enforced educational experiences in which students were plucked from their home environments into classrooms to study numeracy, literacy, religion, and ethics, as well as obedience and duty to country. Critics often describe this approach as the "factory-industrial model". The factory is an apt metaphor used also by its proponents, such as Edward Cubberly, a widely read American educational author of the 1910s and 1920s who wrote administrative handbooks:

> *Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down.*

The factory model of education prepared people for participation in their economies beyond the homestead, as we began moving to cities and collaborating within machinic production. Since then, to get properly schooled, most of us have been required to put away our natural embodied learning processes, what pedagogical researchers now bundle in the term "play".

The Play of Education

A pedagogy of play through experience in both Montessori and Steiner schools informed my daughter's expectations before she entered and, for many years, abandoned a traditional classroom. "Play is the work of the child," wrote Maria Montessori. Similarly, Rudolf Steiner wrote, "If a child has been able in his play to give up his whole loving being to the world around him, he will be able, in the serious tasks of later life, to devote himself with confidence and power to the service of the world." The child-centred models of education inaugurated in the early 1900s by Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner attempted to reconcile the economic need for wide-spread literacy and numeracy with the human, even mammalian, need for self-directed exploration, for play.

Montessori and Steiner schools now abound globally, and other educational innovators are also working to resuscitate

play in the classroom. The International School of Billund in Denmark, for example, has as their mission to place "play at the heart of education," and in so doing, the school asserts the curriculum "stimulates every child's natural desire to learn." The purpose of stimulating the desire to learn is "to cultivate a community of lifelong learners who will create a better world with courage, compassion and curiosity."

The education my daughter easily embraces allows her this play – the play of her imagination and her freedom to act on what she discovers. This model is what Joe Ruhl, a contemporary thought-influencer in the pedagogy space calls 'liberation pedagogy'. In his 2016 TedTalk Teaching Methods for Inspiring Students of the Future, Ruhl cites five key elements of education that define liberation in the classroom: "Choice, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, creativity." He goes on to point out that the National Education Association [NEA] in the US asserted these five as essential 21st century skills for the future.

The End of Education

Similarly to the NEA, the World Economic Forum sets out the following skills as the top skills of 2025:

- Analytical thinking and innovation
- Active learning and learning strategies
- Complex problem-solving
- Critical thinking and analysis
- Creativity, originality and initiative
- Leadership and social influence
- Technology use, monitoring and control
- Technology design and programming
- Resilience, stress tolerance, and flexibility
- Reason, problem-solving and ideation

Notably, these skills are associated with learning through play and seem opposed to the outcomes associated with traditional education, as the following table suggests:

Prussian model	Natural learning model
Work	Play
Remediation	Revelation
Authority directed	Self-directed
Obedience	Choice
Compliance	Curiosity
Certainty	Wonder
Docility	Activity
Acceptance	Experiment
Memorisation	Discovery
Diligence	Delight
Conformity	Creativity
Procedure	Process
Silo	Connectivity
Factory production	Systemic relation
Industrial revolution 1-3	Industrial revolution 4+

Natural learning involves quite a number of elements commonly associated with working at innovative companies like Google or Tesla, those companies contributing some of our most significant innovations. As the fourth industrial revolution unfolds, we are coming full circle in our collaboration with the machines and in our relationship with our inner natures. AI is taking over the rote tasks associated with machine production, while our ability to engage our natural learning processes – our creativity, curiosity, and problem-solving – is coming into demand.

These many years later, I can see now that the activation of our natural learning processes not only preserves the inner dance of our being but also suits the unprecedented times we're in. If I could relive that very first moment when my daughter asked me could she research MacDonald's , I would say yes to my daughter, lover of the rainforest and all living creatures and life itself, and draw her close so she could hear and feel my breath's whisper, hereyes bright with wonder and possibility, I'd say, yes, you can, I'd say, yes.

Glossary

Factory Industrial Model of Education: A description of conventional schooling as treating students like raw material to be processed in an assembly-like fashion. Elements include sorting students by age, one-size-fits all educational units, information dumps.

Natural learning: A cognitive process associated with mammals and particularly evident in humans, whereby learning takes place through internally motivated feedback loops involving curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving. ■

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Three writing tips... from my six year old

By Rosie Tate.

A couple of weeks ago, my son woke up one morning and announced he wanted to write a book: 'I'm six years old – so I think it's about time.' He proceeded to write his very first (and very short) story that morning about a cheetah called Alex who gets kidnapped by a giant mouse.

While The Cheetahs in the Savannah won't win any awards, the way in which he went about it reminded me of how – even as adults – we can make the writing process more enjoyable and effective.

First, there's the ease with which he put words down on paper. I've yet to see my children staring in anguish at a blank page (at least for more than a few seconds). Unbothered about whether the result will be good or bad, they just get on with it. Spelling mistakes may abound and punctuation may be lacking, but the essence of their message comes across. As adults, we can get so caught up in the detail that we forget about the bigger picture: what are we trying to get across?

So if you're suffering from a case of writer's block, try letting go of any expectations and that paralysing fear of making mistakes. The first draft doesn't need to be perfect, or even good – the refining can come later.

Incidentally, if you need a little inspiration on how to be freer when writing, have a read of Gertrude Stein on Punctuation. Commas, she wrote, are 'servile', as their purpose of 'helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it'. When rules have been drummed into us our whole lives, it can be refreshing to throw them out of the window.

That's not to say that rules around punctuation, grammar and spelling aren't important. As the co-founder of an editorial agency, I'm the first to exalt their merits – especially because they make a text easier and more enjoyable to read. And in technical writing, where clarity is key, they're very much needed. But when we want to get a first draft down, it can be useful to forget all about them. Once again, the refining can come later.

Something else that children often excel at is simplicity. Although they've never had the rules of plain English hammered into them, they tend to stick to simple words and short sentences. Granted, they do not have to explain complex, technical topics to their readers, so they have a clear advantage. But even when writing technical documents, getting caught up in technical jargon, winding sentences and too many acronyms is often avoidable.

As Einstein put it, 'If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.' It takes thought to flesh out concepts in accessible language, as it means unpicking what these ideas really mean. If you're writing for a lay audience, it can be useful to take a step back and pretend you're explaining a concept to someone who knows very little about it. This will help guide the readers through your text and make their experience more enjoyable.

My team and I edit and proofread thousands of documents each year, and overly complex writing is by far the most common pitfall we see. Much of our work involves turning jargon into accessible language. There are plenty of free resources on plain English out there, and having an occasional read can serve as a useful reminder – even for seasoned writers – of how to write simply.

We've touched on ease and simplicity, but a text can only work as a whole if a strong structure holds it all together. Amazingly, even young children seem to instinctively know which elements make a good narrative. In my experience, they often include a beginning, middle and end; and some drama in the form of a problem that needs to be solved.

In his book on storytelling 'Into the woods', author John Yorke argues that human beings need to impose order onto the world to make sense of the chaos around us – and this is why narrative comes so naturally to us: 'For narrative is in almost everything we see and everything we do – we render all experience into story.'

You may be thinking that narrative doesn't concern you. If you're writing technical documents, why would you need a storyline? Yet arguably, a narrative can be woven into – and enhance – any document, even one as dry as the above-mentioned savannah. After all, whatever you're writing about, you're putting forward a theory, exploring it and reaching a conclusion. Even in a statistic-dense report, there's usually a story lurking if you look deep enough. If we want people to read it, we'd do well to look behind the numbers and bring this narrative to the fore.

Pablo Picasso famously said: 'It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.' We can draw a parallel with writing: with practice, we can master grammar, syntax and structure to produce something that reads well. As we've seen in recent years, even machines can master these skills. Much more challenging is to write with imagination, freedom, simplicity and playfulness. So next time you're staring at that blank page, try reconnecting with your six-year-old self. You've got a story to tell – just tell it! ■

Rosie Tate

Rosie co-founded Tate & Clayburn in 2012. Her work focuses on helping clients get exceptional results from their publications. A first-class Oxford University languages graduate with an MA in Documentary Filmmaking, she's an experienced editor, writer and producer, having worked for Oxford University Press, the BBC and Save the Children.

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The i-Team® celebrates 20 years

The i-Team® was established in May 2004, specialising in the development of domestic appliance user manuals. Today, The i-Team® is a market leader in the technical communications industry, providing a complete technical documentation development service across the UK, Europe, Middle East, Asia and Africa. The i-Team® also has its own award-winning translation department and a number of in-house developed technical authoring courses. The business started in Yeovil with a single client – a kettle manufacturer – and now on its 20th anniversary celebrates having a London-based office and 100+ clients across multiple sectors: banking and finance, gas and oil, software development and horticulture, to give a few examples.

Key to the success of the business has been its ability to put together a tailored team based on project specifics. With its trained and dedicated team of project managers, technical authors, instructional designers, illustrators and editors, The i-Team® has over the years supported businesses to manufacture and launch products, develop software solutions, make organisational changes, implement standard operating procedures and develop global training programmes. It also takes pride in having worked with the UK Government to explore best practices in product manual writing.

Deliverables produced by The i-Team® include user manuals, training material, standard operating procedures and online help systems. Content, graphics, illustrations, typesetting and translations are all handled in-house to ensure absolute accuracy, which is especially relevant for technical communications. The company is happy to invest time getting to know clients and their detailed requirements before supplying a formal proposal. The first phase of any project is usually a scoping task, during which the main objectives are identified, templates and comprehensive standards developed, and example deliverables produced, all as part of the company's rigorous quality assurance process.

The business celebrates a wonderful working culture with high staff retention rates. It allows complete flexible working. The owner of the business says, "As long as our clients are happy and deadlines are not missed, our team of technical authors can work whatever days of the week they want at whatever hours of the day. I don't believe in micro-management, but I strongly believe in quality control. Quality control is not about micro-management but careful planning, clear communication, appreciating people's differing circumstances and maintaining a good relationship with each and every one of your staff. People make more mistakes when micro-managed than when trusted to deliver, which is why at The i-Team® we have a flexible approach to work but a strict adherence to our quality control measures. My longest serving technical author of 15 years works from a narrowboat, often navigating during the day and producing quality documentation during the calmness of the night!" ■

The importance of content design

How content design impacts the user experience (UX), by Sarah Eager.

"No one will notice the wording." "People don't read." "Users just push buttons." "It doesn't matter." "We don't need copy here."

UX content designers have likely heard many versions of those statements in their careers. All those statements mean the same thing – content design isn't important.

Yet, writing for the user experience is a vital part of UX design. When it comes to designing an outstanding user experience, it's no longer enough to treat copy as simply a necessary (or perhaps unnecessary) evil. Clear, concise, compelling, and consistent text makes interfaces far more useful, valuable, and useable; and helps build a sense of trust with users.

Content designers, also known as UX writers, are responsible for all the text that users encounter when navigating their way around a product. Whether it's a website, a mobile app, a video game menu, or a streaming service, UX copy is crucial in guiding the user and helping them carry out their desired actions. Designers/Writers will also create how-to videos, in-app and push notifications, and emails, and maintain style guides. Anywhere you see words or guidance, a content designer's behind it.

Just like we don't always notice good technical documentation, we seldom register good copy. We carried out our task with minimal fuss and now we can relax; but what we do notice is poor copy that confuses us or complicates the process.

Once an afterthought, UX writing is just as important as the design itself.

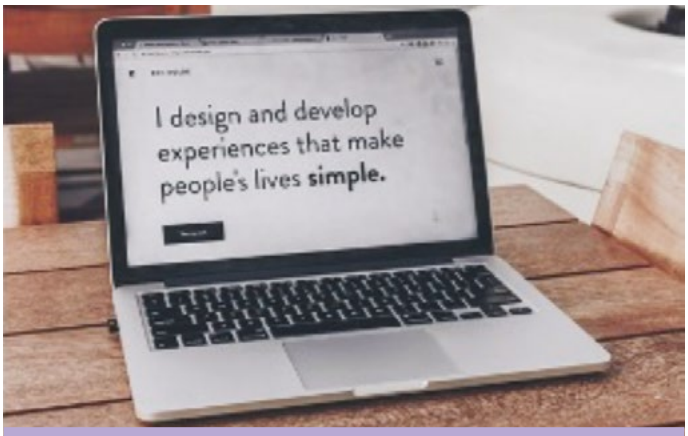


Image by Ben Kolde on Unsplash

Why does content design matter?

Think of your preferred streaming service. You know you want to watch something, but you don't know what. Now imagine there are only images without text. You can't see the name of the film or show, in fact, you don't even know if what you're looking at is a film or show. You have no information on the director, the plot, the genre, or the cast. So, what do you do? Most likely, you close the app and open another streaming service that does help you find what you're looking for and guides you on your journey.

Image by Glenn Carstens-Peters on Unsplash

Every piece of copy, from the smallest tooltip to the most obtrusive warning message impacts the user experience. Whilst on the surface, content design is simply good word choices, it's about so much more than that. It's a way to turn user experiences into immersive interactions so users can get what they need out of the product or service. With time, this leads to improved experiences, conversions, and brand awareness.

Content designers craft copy that's not only succinct yet captivating, but also user-friendly, brand-specific, and caters to the personas who'll engage with the product. UX copy directly affects how users interact with digital content, their perceptions of the brand, and how they achieve their goals.

Let's take a fitness monitoring device, like Fitbit or Google Fit, as an example. Not many of us would be overly interested if not for the congratulatory message that pops up when we reach our daily goals. That little dopamine hit is thanks to a content designer. How about when we enter the incorrect password to access our email account? We might not like the error message and what it means, but without it, we're stuck mashing the Sign in button with no indication that something's wrong. That error message is also the work of a content designer.

We've all heard of Duolingo and their sassy, passive-aggressive owl, Duo. Duo's a central part of the experience, greeting users when they open the app, cheering them on when they achieve milestones, and reminding users to complete their daily lessons via push notifications. The Duolingo copy's a clever mix of persistent, helpful, motivational, and supportive content, and with 500 million users worldwide, it has contributed massively to the company's success. Is that little owl annoying (and maybe a little frightening)? Definitely. Does it encourage users to continue their lessons and guide them on their journey? Absolutely. Without content designers, Duolingo would just be another app we all forgot about long ago.

The role of a content designer

Content designers make sure that the user experience goes as seamlessly as possible. Writing for the user experience is all about smooth, facilitative passage through a product, so it's essential that content designers are involved in the design process from the very beginning.

That doesn't mean that content designers are limited simply to writing. To craft compelling copy that engages users and elevates their experience, it's crucial to first understand the full product design and development process – and how good copy contributes to that.

Content designers may conduct or be involved in copy-focused user research sessions to build a sense of empathy for their target audience. Who are you writing for? What tone of voice is most likely to resonate with your users? Content designers can then use these insights to devise an overarching UX editorial strategy, ensuring that copy is consistent across all products and interfaces.

Image by Jason Goodman on Unsplash

In addition to writing new copy, content designers also perform regular analysis and health-checks on existing product copy. This may include analysing product metrics such as daily sessions, time-on-page, and goal completion rates. It may also include combing through the product in search of inconsistencies, unclear text, and poor word choices. Content designers:

- Look at how the copy makes the user feel – does it frustrate, confuse, or empower?
- Plan how to improve the copy to elevate the product – does it need some minor tweaks or is a complete overhaul needed?
- Carry out analyses of competitors to understand industry trends and best practices and determine how to implement these in the product.

It's easy to think of content designers working in a silo. That's not the case.

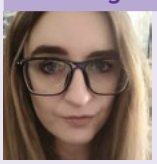
Content designers work with UX designers, researchers, information architects, project managers, technical writers, and engineers, to name a few. They'll work to ensure that: the product layout and copy work together in harmony, the copy can easily be documented, and there's appropriate functionality for the updates. They'll establish a distinct brand voice and aid every touch point the user goes through in their journey.

Ultimately, copy can make or break the user experience. A beautiful interface is certainly nice to look at, but when it's littered with confusing, misleading, or grammatically incorrect copy, the user suffers.

The role of a content designer is to ensure that copy forms an integral part of the design process from start to finish. Content designers act as dedicated wordsmiths, championing the importance of language and semantics, and establishing a consistent brand voice and tone across all user touch points.

Without carefully crafted copy, users will simply close the app or web page and access another service that does help them find what they're looking for, and guides them on their journey. ■

Sarah Eager



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5 Cs to achieve user-friendly standards – part 1

Ciaran Dodd shares some reader-friendly writing tips

Context

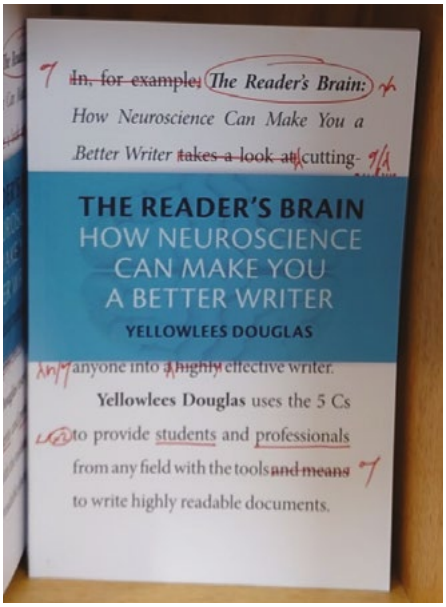
In my last article (Dodd 2024), I shared the challenges of writing user-friendly standards and ended with the optimistic statement that yes, I believe that user-friendly standards are possible. I gave these suggestions for writing user-friendly standards:

1. Be clear what the objectives of your standard are and more, who your audience are and what they need? What level of knowledge are you writing to? Or is it better to start from first principles and assume that your readers are new to the subject?
2. Make sure that everyone involved in writing the standard has agreed the objectives of the standard and the needs of the audience.
3. Devise a method to manage the terminology, agree definitions and compile a glossary of terms for everyone to use.
4. Decide the style that you will write to and make sure that everyone agrees. If the style differs from what the writers are used to, for example plain language, take time to train the writers.
5. Agree your editing approach, use a checklist, and give your feedback constructively, with examples, to guide your writers.
6. Give sufficient time to writing and editing.

Since the theme of summer's *Communicator* is education, I thought it would be an opportune time to show how to implement these suggestions, preferably with research-based guidance. Enter a very readable book called: 'The Reader's Brain, How Neuroscience Can Make You a Better Writer' by academic Yellowlees Douglas (Douglas 2015).

Why do I like this book?

1. The author provides coherent and detailed advice on how to structure sentences, paragraphs and documents effectively for readers. In



the many books on writing that I have read, structure is usually limited to "write short sentences with one main idea", or "keep paragraphs to a single topic" but without fully explaining why. This book gives us the why, and the advice is distilled from research.
2. The author practises what she preaches. The content of the book is complex and technical (for she describes the findings of academic research in neuroscience for non-expert readers) which is analogous to what many technical authors do every day.
3. I like a model that is broken into manageable chunks like the 5 Cs used in this book!

What are the 5 Cs?

If you're jumping up and down wondering what these 5 Cs are, jump no more. They are:

1. Clarity: choosing words and structuring sentences
2. Continuity: putting sentences together
3. Coherence: organising paragraphs and documents
4. Concision: maximising efficiency
5. Cadence: making music with words.

Under each C there is a set of principles that I'll explore in the two parts of this article. But before we get to the 5 Cs, the author uses research into how we read to explain how traditional writing advice misses the mark.

In this column, part 1, I'll describe how we read, and the principle of clarity. In the autumn column, part 2, I'll continue with the principles of continuity, coherence, concision and cadence.

'So much advice, so much lousy writing'

This is the title of the first chapter in Douglas' book. In this chapter she sets out the need for this book. Her argument is that although there have been plenty of writing 'experts' who have dispensed their writing wisdom, for example Strunk and White's Elements of Style (Strunk, 1999), the advice has been contradictory or superficial because the advice hasn't been built on solid research foundations, until now.

Douglas states that there are three aspects of writing that demand skill, which she describes as:

1. Macro: developing the argument
2. Micro: correct usage (punctuation and grammar)
3. Messy middle: what makes clear and effective sentences and paragraphs.

Traditionally, writing advice has focused on items one and two with little advice for item three: "Between the macro side of writing - the features of argument - and the micro side with its grammar and punctuation exists a vast middle ground, where virtually all the grunt work of writing occurs." (2, Douglas)

Additionally, research into the process of reading and the teaching of writing skills have remained two separate fields of study. Douglas used her decade of research into how we read to develop principles to help her students master academic writing, the results of which are this book, published in 2015.

What do we need to know about the reading process to understand the 5 Cs?

Here is a summary of the research into the reading process. (I refer you to chapter 2 for full detail on the research

methods and the effectiveness of readability statistics.)

1. The process of reading is complex.
2. Reading is a multi-stage process (although the exact number of stages is debated).
3. The agreed first stage is recognising words.
4. The speed at which we recognise words depends on the context of the words. "The more specific the context, the more constraint those surroundings put on the individual word, and the fewer meanings we're likely to attach to it." (17, Douglas)
5. The second stage is syntactic processing: assigning meaning to words depending on their position in the sentence. This is because words can assume different parts of speech depending on where they are in the sentence.
6. One of the tools that we use is prediction. "...we anticipate what's coming next...by projecting the most common, most predictable scenarios." (18, Douglas) For example, we expect to see the main noun of the sentence before the main verb of the sentence. When that doesn't happen, we must expend more time and mental energy understanding what we're reading.
7. Prediction is about looking forward in a text. If you must reread a text, it means that your predictions were incorrect, and you need to test predictions until you make sense of the text. (Whether your understanding is the same as the author's understanding is a separate question!)
8. The next stage in the reading process is inference building. Inference building means turning nouns and verbs into "actions, abstractions and theories." (21, Douglas) We take what we have read and compare it with what we know of the world to see if what we have read makes sense to us. According to some research, we use questions like who, what, where, when, and how to turn sentences into possible scenarios. This is even easier if the writer links the ideas to show cause and effect.
9. "Both syntactic and inferential levels of processing rely on frameworks for understanding, known to cognitive psychologists as schemas." (23, Douglas) "Schemas lay out possibilities for actions and interpretations, and we make inferences about the way sentences will play out based on our understanding of the larger context. But schemas also provide us with a feedback loop. We can confirm the accuracy of the schema we've unconsciously chosen to guide our interpretation of an article...by checking the way it fits with the local details we encounter at sentence level." (25, Douglas)
10. If you give your readers clues to appropriate schemas with titles, section headers, or summaries, your readers are more likely to choose the correct schemas to apply to understand your text. "As a result, a familiar schema can speed our comprehension at all three levels of the reading process: lexical, syntax and inference processing." (25, Douglas)

What does this mean in practice? If as writers, we create text in ways that conform with the way our readers' minds work:

- we make what is already a difficult process much easier for the reader, and
- increase the chances of communicating our ideas in the way that we intended.

These seem like two good reasons to see what the 5 Cs of clarity, continuity, coherence, concision and cadence have to offer us!

> *Efficiency and clarity in writing, as in most forms of communication, result when readers and writers rely on the same sets of expectations. (20, Douglas)*

First C: clarity

This first C focuses on choosing words and structuring sentences to make your text easy to read by working with the way that we read rather than against it.

There are four clarity principles to help you to do this.

"1. Prefer active to passive construction.
2. Make your verbs portray action whenever possible.
3. Use actors or concrete objects as your grammatical subjects.
4. Place grammatical subjects close to the beginnings of sentences and the verb as close as possible to the subject." (Pages 36,42,51,56 respectively, Douglas)

Those of you who have read this column for some time will know that principles one and two are principles I regularly espouse whether I'm talking about plain English, plain language, or ASD-STE100 Simplified Technical English (STE). But now, we have the research that shows why these principles make text easier to read. The active voice is the natural way to present events:

"The cat sat on the mat." Not, "The mat was sat on by the cat."

If I think back to learning to read and write at school (or more recently my children learning), both I and they learned the active voice first. According to the National Curriculum in England (2014), children aren't introduced to the passive voice until the end of primary school (age 10/11).

That's not to say that the passive voice has no role in clear writing. I advise that the active voice is your default setting unless there is a good reason to use the passive voice such as:

1. You are writing text where what was done is more important than who did it.
2. The person who did it is unknown.
3. You wish to avoid assigning or assuming blame, in a dispute for example.

Principle two refers to nominalisations or zombie nouns as Helen Sword refers to them in her YouTube video (Sword). Why? Because when we write or speak, we are frequently communicating about what we've done or are going to do. But if we turn action verbs into these zombie nouns (calculate becomes calculation, investigate becomes investigation), we're forced to add in vague verbs like 'have' or 'make' and suck the life out of our writing and the will to read out of our readers.

Additionally, Douglas points out that starting a sentence with 'there is' or 'there are' is "always a bad idea" (40, Douglas) because "...you turn the natural order of English sentences upside down...*there* hogs the spot where your readers would normally expect to see the all-important subject of the sentence. Worse, the verb *is* shoves its

way in front of the actual subject of the sentence, which really jams your readers' radar." (41, Douglas) In other words, your sentence is not following familiar patterns causing your reader to work harder to decode what you mean.

> *...rereading is a luxury and effort we spare only when the stakes are high... To hold our attention, you have to write well. The scarcity of both our time and attention demands nothing less. (163 Douglas 2015)*

Instead, clarity principle 3 recommends that you choose actors ("individuals, groups, even abstractions that are capable of action.") For example, I or we, researchers or the marketing department, The White House. (51, Douglas) If you have actors, action verbs and an active construction, your reader will not have any surprises that may force them to reread your sentence.

Avoid starting your sentence with 'this' or 'it' because these pronouns (should!) refer to a noun that you have already mentioned previously. If you have these pronouns at the beginning of a sentence, then the noun that you're referring to must be in a previous sentence. Therefore, you are sending your reader backwards, which isn't ideal as we saw in the section on how we read! Consequently, Douglas advises us to "avoid using isolated pronouns as your subjects – words like *this, that, these, it, and those*, which rely on other words to express their meaning explicitly." (53, Douglas)

A second expert tip is to avoid starting sentences with a phrase or clause. For example, in the sentence below, the underlined text is the subject of the verb 'makes':

Starting sentences with a phrase or clause makes sentences more complicated than they need to be.

I can make this sentence much clearer if I write:

If you start a sentence with a phrase or clause, then you make sentences more complicated than they need to be.

Of the two, the second sentence isn't much longer, says the same thing but in a more reader-friendly construction. Which do you prefer?

I think that these two sentences also illustrate clarity principle number 4. In the second sentence I have placed the grammatical subject and the verb closer to the beginning of the second sentence, unlike in the first sentence. That's not to say that you can't have a short phrase or clause at the beginning of a sentence but do keep it short! For example:

Although the traffic was bad on the A38, I arrived at work on time.

In the autumn article, I'll bring you the other four Cs: continuity, coherence, concision and cadence. ■

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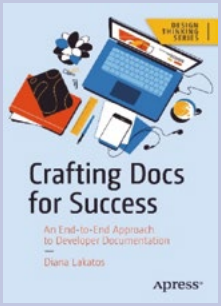
Crafting Docs for Success:

An End-to-End Approach to Developer Documentation. By Diana Lakatos

Rating: ★★★★☆



Crafting Docs for Success: An End-to-End Approach to Developer Documentation
Diana Lakatos

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Reviewed by Tanya Brown.

Introduction

Long ago, in my first role as a lead technical author, I was criticised for focusing on the tools that we could use, rather than the content of the documentation that we'd be producing. I wish I'd had Diana Lakatos's Crafting Docs for Success to hand: it would have helped me formulate and express my instinct that if you choose the right tools, the workflow from blank page to documentation suite becomes smoother, easier and more intuitive.

Description

Lakatos sets out her goals in her introduction: she aims to provide "a blueprint for building successful developer documentation… along with practical, usable templates, workflows, and tools". Crafting Docs for Success was inspired by her work documenting PlatformOS (https://www.platformos.com/), a managed application development platform designed for developers. PlatformOS won the ISTC's Technical Communication Award 2019 for 'an outstanding example of how technical product documentation can work as an integrated part of the product, the teams that create it and the community that uses it'. The focus of her discussion is very much on developer, rather than end-user, documentation: but the approach she suggests can be adapted for other scenarios.

From the first chapter, 'Approaches', it's clear that one of the mainstays of Lakatos's methodology is the 'Docs as Code' approach. This is the process of using the same tools to develop documentation as the developers use to develop the product. It typically involves version control, markdown, automation, issue trackers and code reviews. (The Technical Reviewer of Crafting Docs for Success, Anne Gentle, is also the author of Docs Like Code.)

> *The most important aspect of Design Thinking is empathy for the user – it should be the driving force behind everything you do.*

Lakatos sets out the elements of the Design Thinking approach, a 'human-centred, iterative, non-linear design process': the five stages (Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test) are discussed in the context of a documentation workflow, with examples of goals and tasks.

Lakatos stresses the importance of understanding the audience. She writes that you shouldn't start prototyping your content until you understand what sort of content, and in what format, best suits the audience and the product. When you do understand that though, the 'Content Before Design' approach is a way of using the content to inform the design, rather than creating dummy documentation with placeholder images and text. Knowing the content you're aiming to provide can help you decide on the best structure and design for that content. Lakatos briefly discusses topic-based authoring and DITA here: breaking the required information down into small logical units makes it easier to rearrange, reuse and restructure documentation.

In the chapter on 'Foundations', Lakatos walks us through the 'discovery' phase of a documentation project, covering everything from budget and timescale to user research methodologies. She discusses the types of users (systematic, opportunistic and pragmatic) and the likelihood that, although the documentation may be intended for developers, it will also be used by support teams, business analysts and product owners – possibly even as a basis for end-user documentation.

Chapter Three, 'Editorial Workflow', describes a flexible approach to the editorial process. The workflow should permit internal and external users to make large and small changes; it should allow for rapid publication and frequent updates; and *it should* support parallel working, tracking other users' changes, and a robust review process. Lakatos describes the 'Docs as Code' editorial workflow used at PlatformOS, which is based on the Docs as Code and Design Thinking approaches discussed earlier in the book.

This chapter is considerably more technical than the preceding content: it discusses in detail the use of GitHub repositories as part of the documentation workflow. Lakatos assumes a working knowledge of GitHub: a brief summary of the concepts and terminology (pulls, merges, repositories) would have been helpful here.

> *A great editorial experience will make it easy – even enjoyable – for your team members and external contributors to add or improve documentation content, which means that they will be more willing and more engaged to contribute.*

The chapter continues with a good overview of issue management – tracking and coordinating problems and requests – and a section on Inclusive Review Culture, which stresses the importance of community involvement. In both these areas, collaboration is vital: feedback from users of the documentation, and information from subject matter experts, contribute to the community culture as well as helping to improve the documentation.

Chapter Four, 'Content Production', discusses tools and processes to

facilitate the 'Content First' approach. Lakatos gives a good summary of Markdown, a lightweight markup syntax for creating formatted text. Markdown is likely to be familiar to developers; it can be edited in a simple text editor; it's easy to learn the basics, and it translates easily into HTML.The documentation team can set up templates and create style guides for users who may not be familiar with the structure or style of the documentation. It's important to be clear about what is expected from external (and internal!) contributors: well-structured style guides, checklists and templates can make the contribution and review processes simple, even when the contributor has little experience of the documentation workflow.

Chapter Five covers 'Implementation', from initial wireframes and templates to publishing a developer documentation site. Lakatos discusses documentation-hosting platforms, static site generators and content management systems, API documentation generators, and the automation of testing and publishing in a CI/CD (Continuous Improvement / Continuous Development) workflow. Again, some of the discussion here is quite technical, but there are plenty of footnotes and references, and Lakatos highlights some useful resources.

The remainder of the book deals with the 'softer' side of documentation. Chapter Six focusses on 'Community', examining collaboration and user research in more depth. Lakatos suggests methods of eliciting feedback, not just during the development of the documentation but also when it's been published. There's a good section on the methods developed by her team to record and make available the results of user research. "For larger changes, we usually present the problem we wanted to solve, the research results, and the improvements based on the results in a live video conference session that we also record. This way, users can react immediately but can also watch the recording later and discuss it on other channels. For smaller changes, we share the results in our regular status reports."

Chapter Seven deals with 'Accessibility and Inclusion': a documentation site must be perceivable, operable, understandable and robust, and the Docs as Code approach (with its emphasis on rapid publication, consistency, automated testing and collaboration) can be helpful in ensuring that standards are adhered to. Lakatos provides a good overview of writing for accessibility, with many linked resources and a discussion of some common pitfalls.

Chapter Eight, 'Sustainability', is mostly concerned with reducing the energy consumption of your site, and how to optimise performance and searchability. Chapter Nine discusses the structure of a documentation team, and the importance of a corporate culture that understands the importance of documentation and prioritises resourcing for the technical authors, UX designers and information architects who develop it.

The final chapter, 'Measures of Success', examines what makes documentation successful: a balance between completeness and conciseness, with content that is readable, clear and accurate. Lakatos explains how the Docs as Code approach can help you to monitor and analyse your documentation site. There's also a useful section – harking back to the remarks about corporate culture in the previous chapter! – about how to measure the impact of your documentation: checking for a reduction in customer support tickets, reducing the time spent in tracking down information, and (if your site is publicly available) minimising paid marketing costs by providing product information to potential customers.

Evaluation

This is a valuable resource for anyone creating, or restructuring, a documentation team or workflow. Lakatos's examples are described clearly, and are generalised enough to be useful in a wide range of industries, scenarios and working environments. Diagrams and flowcharts are polished and accessible, and the author provides copious hyperlinked references throughout the book.

Buyers beware, though: if you purchase Crafting Docs for Success as a Kindle ebook from Amazon, the book you receive will not have a functioning index. (I have raised this with Amazon and with the publishers. Amazon did not reply, while an email to Springer, who publish under the Apress imprint, elicited advice to buy an EPUB-format ebook directly from their site.)

Conclusion

Users in tightly-controlled corporate IT environments – perhaps locked into using proprietary software, or all-purpose workflows which aren't a good fit for documentation work -- may find Crafting Docs for Success a frustrating read, simply because they are unable to choose to use the open-source tools suggested, or to restructure their team and company environment to best implement a Docs as Code-style process. However, many of the methodologies and approaches that Lakatos suggests can be implemented within any documentation team, and the resources gathered by Lakatos form a valuable set of reference material. I'll certainly be recommending this book to colleagues. It offers a low-cost, flexible way to manage the documentation process from initiation to publication, prioritising the user and the community. ■

About the Author

Diana Lakatos is an experienced Developer Documentation Specialist dedicated to creating high-quality resources for developers. She has played an instrumental role in the development of the multiple award-winning platformOS Developer Portal, and manages all phases of the editorial workflow, creates templates, incorporates best practices, and writes, edits, and reviews content. She has spoken about various aspects of building efficient developer docs at conferences like Write The Docs, tcworld, DevRelCon, and API The Docs.

Further reading

Docs Like Code, by Anne Gentle

Beginning Git and GitHub: A Comprehensive Guide to Version Control, Project Management, and Teamwork for the New Developer, by Mariot Tsitoara

In a globalised world, should we retain different Englishes?

Lynne Murphy.

If only the whole world had a language in common, war could be avoided. That's what LL Zamenhof thought when he developed Esperanto in 1887. Esperanto wasn't meant to replace anyone's home language, but it would create a common ground for people from different backgrounds. It would make communication easier and more direct, reducing the need for go-betweens like translators and interpreters.

But in order to effect this world peace, every nation would have to turn its educational resources to a language without native speakers and without widespread currency. Despite the pockets of people still using it today, Esperanto had little chance of becoming the language of diplomacy, commerce and tourism.

English, on the other hand, has something that no other language in history has had: billions of speakers. It was not a pleasant history that got us to this point, but as more of the world spoke English, more of the world took an interest in learning it.

Now the world doesn't learn English to just speak to native English speakers. The world learns English in order to speak with everyone.

Where people speak English, new Englishes develop – whether that be in another country or in an international setting like the European Parliament or a NATO operation. While all those Englishes are mostly mutually intelligible, they are still Englishes, plural. A global English has not evolved through globalisation, though some of the local edges are filed off in some contexts.

With their huge vocabularies, obscure idioms, and long, complex sentences, the native Englishes of the UK or the US are not the best models for an international English (even if they might be seen as prestige varieties). Serious proponents of a global variety of English take the advanced English learner as their model speaker, and accordingly they simplify the language to make it more straightforward. Vocabulary is the main point of simplification. Language generally follows the 80/20 rule: 20 per cent of the vocabulary accounts for 80 per cent of what we say. Deprioritise the other 80 per cent of the lexicon, and you can communicate most things with no loss of meaning. Variant spellings are reduced to one choice, usually the American form, which is generally the more phonetic spelling.

Would it work?

I have my doubts about the workability of a standardised Global English. For one, how often do we need our English to be truly global? While the internet makes many more texts available worldwide, each text is generally written with an audience in mind. Even if it is an international audience, chances are that the text's appeal will be specific to a global region or to some other subset of international readers. Sensitivity to common denominators shared by that audience's Englishes can be useful, but adherence to a global set of lowest common denominators is unnecessary. There's no reason to spell like an American for a South African audience or to avoid Latinate vocabulary for a South American audience.

Another problem is determining what the global standard should be. There is no international body regulating English, so proposals for 'Globish' come with no in-built authority (though some come with an aim to line someone's pockets). Which spellings, which words, which pronunciations should be taken as the standard? The powerful national standards, British or American, might be seen as the default options. But to adopt one or the other is to immediately undermine the goal of an internationally neutral English.

Editing English for global audiences

That's not to say that international standards won't evolve, but they do need to evolve. A living language isn't like a measurement system or even like a terminology set – it is much, much more complex and unrestrained. Standard Englishes evolve because lots of people made lots of choices and their choices started to converge. Editors and style sheets contribute to that process – but it's always a process. There is no definitive end.

The editing considerations differ according to audience, topic and author. A medical journal article on kidney disease speaks to an audience with a common vocabulary and argumentation style and the journal style sheet will impose a spelling and punctuation standard. But patient-oriented websites will need to communicate to a range of people whose linguistic identities and linguistic needs differ. While a text might be available to anyone with internet access, it might benefit from feeling 'local' rather than 'global'. The NHS, for instance, forgoes standard medical spelling (eg fetus1) in order to avoid accusations of Americanisation and uses informal, idiomatic British English so as to feel more accessible and jargon-free (eg pass water, back passage). In trying to optimise accessibility, it takes itself further from a globally accessible English. That might seem justified – it is, after all, the National Health Service – until one thinks about how 'global' users of the NHS can be. Following Plain English guidelines can often help in communicating with a diverse audience, but it's always worth keeping in mind that 'plainness' is subjective and potentially culture specific.

Besides audiences, we need to think about the author and their English, particularly when the author's and the editor's backgrounds differ. In an age when English is for everyone, editors need to appraise their assumptions about what makes good, clear English and their ability to recognise good English that is different from their own. I know well the experience of having my words changed by well-meaning American editors who assume my

English has become very British, and well-meaning British editors who see their job as de-Americanising me. In both directions, I risk having my most creative writing – the novel metaphors or plays on words – unstuck by an editor's expectation that my writing will bear defects rather than innovations. When I read 'AU: did you mean X? Here we say X', I think, 'this person isn't reading my text as much as they're reading their expectations of what needs to be "fixed" about my "foreignness"'. But I know that I've done the same when editing the English texts of competent non-native speakers, and I know how easy it is for native speakers to claim expertise. If there is to be a global English, it should be the kind of English that is open to different voices. Editors have a role to play in enabling those voices rather than putting them all on the same narrow track.

Generosity, curiosity, humility and teamwork

Good editors are supposed to have a good ear for the language. That expression makes it sound like there's one language to have an ear for. But the English language contains multitudes, and the best editors know that. They need not just an ear for English, but an ear for the author and an eye on the audience. That's a lot to ask of one person. It might be too much to ask when an English text must work for a global range of audiences.

When a text is expected to reach a global audience, it can be put into a 'global' English or it can be repeatedly localised. Both approaches require multiple perspectives on the text and the language, but it's unclear to me how often texts get those perspectives. To give a minor example, non-American editors often tell me that they edit in (or into) American English and that always gives me pause. If it's just a matter of following US spelling and a US punctuation style for an international academic publication, then that seems very doable, since academic registers are fairly international to start with. But the localisation or globalisation issues for, say, journalism or marketing may well be much broader. They require a sensitivity to what's done in other places, and, more importantly, a sensitivity to the strangeness of what's done in one's own place. People (even those of us with a close eye on English) are very good at recognising the oddness of others' Englishes, but not very good at knowing which of their own turns of phrase won't be understood elsewhere.

Any editing requires elements of generosity, curiosity and humility – towards the language, the author and the audience. These characteristics become more important in global contexts where many Englishes come together. When working with international texts and audiences, these traits could be amplified by teamwork – something that I've seen discussed more at translators' conferences than editors' ones. For texts that are meant to be truly global, a second pair of eyes, looking through a different linguistic/contextual lens, could give a final read-through to help ensure that what is intended as a 'global' text truly is. Such editorial partnerships between freelancers might be rare, but they might also open the door to new work and to new standards of working in this globalised world. (If you're in one, I'd love to hear about it.)

Some ideas for you to think about

Lynne's paper shows us that language does not stand still, so as professionals working with words we need to think about how this affects our practice and the assumptions we may make about what's 'right' or 'wrong' when we edit. Here are some ideas to think about for starters. If you're a CIEP member, why not continue the discussion on the forums?

- English has something that no language in history has had: billions of speakers. How might that influence the way English develops globally?
- Wherever people speak English, new Englishes develop, in contexts from whole countries to discrete groups, such as in NATO operations. What new Englishes could emerge in the near future?
- A truly global English has not yet evolved through globalisation, but perhaps some localisms are used less or are being replaced with more global alternatives. Can you think of examples?
- On the other hand, some organisations, in trying to optimise accessibility by using informal 'local' language, may be moving further away from a globally accessible English. Will that help or hinder their audiences?
- Editors need to regularly question their assumptions about what makes good, clear English and sharpen their ability to recognise good English that is different from their own. How could you play your part in enabling diverse voices?
- Editors need not just an ear for English, but an ear for the author and an eye on the audience. That's a lot to ask of one person. What are some good ways to learn these skills?
- People are very good at recognising the oddness of others' Englishes, but not very good at knowing which of their own turns of phrase won't be understood elsewhere. Can you think of some examples of phrases in your own English that might be hard to understand?
- Editorial partnerships across countries and contexts could open the door to new standards of language working in this globalised world. Who could you work with to bring this about? ■

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Real Life Dilemmas

Will AI take over my job?.

Warren Singer invites you to discuss true dilemmas encountered by today's technical communicators.

The future of AI

"AI will never take over my job!" John said aloud to his friend Mike, and laughed dismissively.

Mike had been talking about an article he'd read recently in the Economist, about Artificial Intelligence (AI), in which the author predicted that the jobs of many professions were likely to disappear.

John was scornful. "You shouldn't believe everything you read. Some authors like to exaggerate."

But Mike was unsure, the article had sounded convincing.

John smiled. "Ok, I agree, some of the more repetitive jobs might be taken over by machines. It makes sense to do this where routine tasks could be mechanised. But do you really believe that AI will be able to take over complex jobs – especially work that requires human thinking or interacting with humans?"

John's reasoning was as follows: most products and services are designed for use by humans. And only humans can truly understand what other humans want and need. A machine would have to be able to think like a human to do what a human being could do, he thought.

John was an AI enthusiast. He believed in the benefits of AI. He could already see the effects of the AI tools in his workplace, which were helping him to do his job better: his organisation had recently introduced AI software that performed the role of a secretary, recording meeting minutes, transcribing speech into text and producing summarised meeting digests. An AI chatbot, installed on their support website, was using the information their team of technical communicators was producing – helping to answer customer queries and reducing the number of calls to customer services.

AI, John firmly believed, was going to be a wonderful tool, working alongside humans, taking away the more mechanised and routine tasks, bringing new insights and driving efficiencies. Salaries would increase as AI improved productivity, people would need to work fewer hours for the same output. New job opportunities would open up, to replace the mechanical, routine jobs that were going to be lost to AI. The future looked bright. Everyone was going to benefit.

John thought about his own two children. Education was going to be vital to their success – they would need the skills in the new digital economy, to take advantage of the opportunities of AI.

A Glimpse into the Future

Has John underestimated the potential impact of AI? Let's take a brief glimpse into his future.

June 2027: John had enthusiastically embraced the rapid changes in his organisation. He was now the manager of a technical publications team consisting of five writers, a translator, an editor, a graphic designer, a UX (User Interface) designer and a web designer. Over the past few years AI had become an integral part of their tools and work practices, and John was proud of what he and his team had accomplished during this period.

June 2028: their organisation had purchased a licence for a new AI web design platform which was able to automate most of the tasks performed by web developers and coders. It wasn't long before the organisation realised that AI, as implemented in an off-the-shelf web design platform, could do a better job than Fred, the team's web designer, and at a fraction of the cost. At the meeting with his manager, John learnt there was no alternative – Fred's job would need to go.

John was sad and felt regret. He liked Fred and he hoped that Fred would be able to retrain and find another career.

June 2029: His editor, Jane, was leaving the organisation to work for a company developing a new AI-powered open-source proof-reading and automated editing platform. John's organisation, like many other global organisations, had embraced the Open AI content standard. Organisations that adopted this standard (which included linguistic, stylistic and taxonomy guidelines) were able to produce consistent content– making it easier for AI software to process and edit. The content standard improved and streamlined the task of content editing. There was already a plethora of AI tools on the market able to offer an off-the-shelf editorial service. John's organisation would not be replacing Jane's role.

June 2030: John's team of writers were still busy producing content for the organisation, but another member of the team needed to be let go. Advances in AI automation now meant that the role for an API documentation writer was largely redundant. The content could be automatically generated from code and edited by an outsourced AI editorial platform.

June 2031: John felt a shudder passing down his spine as he said goodbye to Samantha, their translation coordinator. AI language translation tools had been around for a number of years, greatly simplifying the task of translation. It had enabled his organisation to produce content in multiple languages, for overseas markets. Recent advances in machine translation, together with his organisation's adoption of the Open AI content standard, meant that the task of translation was now much simplified, and human-ready translated content could be produced on-demand, without the need for human intervention.

June 2032: John said goodbye to Joe, Lisa and Sam, three writers in his team, who had left the organisation to seek alternative opportunities, and whose roles would not be replaced. AI software tools had now advanced to the level where you could instruct them to produce new structured content. Their organisation had recently purchased an AI-powered content writing application that was able to produce user guides – all you needed to do was point the application to sources of information, input the required configuration parameters, and provide some guidelines as to target audience, guide purpose and structure. The software was able to leverage the Open AI

content standard and write structured user guides. Only John's role was left in the team, to coordinate the work.

June 2033: John felt afraid about the future as he said goodbye to Rebecca, his UX designer and the last member of this team. The role was being outsourced to an external agency. The agency 's advanced AI software implemented modelling and computer-aided design based on a set of proprietary design and UX heuristics, which could be employed at a fraction of the cost. Sandra, his graphic designer, had also been made redundant earlier during the year: off-the-shelf libraries of graphics and AI-powered graphic design software had meant that her job was largely obsolete – at least for their organisation.

June 2034: John arranged a meeting with his new manager, AI Manager. AI Manager was an android, which had been designed to do the same tasks as a human manager. It had a humanoid face, could speak 20 languages fluently and was programmed to detect up to 26 different human emotions and respond in the correct and most appropriate manner, depending on parameters such as the age, gender, cultural background and position in the organisation of the employee.

The organisation had decided that most mid-level managers were now an unnecessary cost. The reduction in organisation staff numbers, due to AI, meant the role of mid-level managers was now largely redundant. AI Manager could do a better job of monitoring performance, tracking workloads, budgeting, forecasting and reporting.

June 2035: It came as a shock, when the AI Manager told him, "I am very sorry John, but the organisation has decided your position is no longer needed."

John felt his blood turn cold. "What..?" He felt confused, "I don't believe you! Who is going to do all my work?"

The AI Manager paused, processing, then responded. "I'm sorry John, but your replacement, AI-Writer-John, has already been trained on all of your tasks."

John cried out angrily. "How could you do this to me? After all these years?"

The AI Manager took a moment to process. "John, your years of service are recognised by the organisation and we'd like to thank you for all you have done. You will be well compensated. We are prepared to offer you a senior manager leaver's package, which includes a tax free lump sum equal to two years' salary, and a support package to help you retrain."

That evening, John discussed his redundancy package with his wife Betty. The children were now in high school, and they had many expenses. There were tears of defeat in his eyes. "They asked me to sign a waiver, Betty, indemnifying them from any future legal action and requiring me to agree to never speak out against their organisation! I don't know if I can do that."

"Take the money John!" Betty urged. "That's a generous package. Just take the money. You know what's happening out there, with hundreds of thousands of people unemployed."

June 2036: John joined the back of the long unemployment queue. There were thousands waiting for an appointment, and the queue stretched for a mile outside the shiny new building, recently built to accommodate the vastly expanded numbers of unemployed. The unemployment office was now manned by a team of robotic androids. The androids were fast and efficient and the queue moved quickly. In less than an hour, it was John's turn.

The android quickly scanned John's record. "Unfortunately your CV indicates you don't have the skills employers are currently looking for." The android paused, processing John's downcast facial expression, before proceeding. "Most jobs are now in AI support and AI programming," the android employment officer explained. "We need people who can train robots and software to do tasks."

John sighed.

"Cheer up Mr Smith," said the android. "I have added you to the list of people waiting for the next retraining slot. You will of course be entitled to job seeker's allowance."

June 2037: John was watching the news. Parliament were debating an increase to universal income, a basic salary paid out to all citizens, irrespective of their age or status, which had been introduced in 2035. Universal income was popular, but it didn't help to stem the growing population unrest and anger at AI and the loss of jobs.

A television reporter was talking to a doctor, who had recently been made redundant. The doctor was angry and confused. The reporter switched to talking to a member of the government, asking whether it was controversial to be replacing doctors, therapists and nurses with AI-powered androids in such large numbers.

The government minister smiled apologetically, "I sympathise with those who have unfortunately been made redundant," he said, "However, as you are aware, the costs to the taxpayer of running the NHS are astronomical, and these measures will reduce costs by 50%. The healthcare system is already greatly improved, and the horrendous waiting times of months, if not years, which we used to experience in the past, have now been reduced to weeks and days."

John turned off the TV and sighed. Oh well! He thought. It could be worse. He spent most of his time at home, pottering around in the garden. He got to spend more time with his family, doing hobbies and other things he enjoyed. He had taken up creative writing as a hobby, and found both fulfilment and also some recognition and income from his writing.

At least I can still write creatively, the product of my very human experience and nature! A robot will never be able to do that!

Would it...? ■

Over to you

Tell us about your view of AI. Are we all doomed to the same fate as John?

If you have a dilemma you'd like advice about, write to us in confidence.

Note: To protect the identity of real people, all names and places are fictitious.

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Real-life responses

The office (published in the Winter issue)

Readers' letters in response to Loren's dilemma, described in the Autumn 2023 issue of *Communicator*.

Summary of dilemma

In the previous issue we discussed the pros and cons of being an older technical communicator.

Mike

As an older worker, recently made redundant, I have encountered age-related prejudice when applying for new jobs. It's disappointing.

Gerry

Older workers have so much to offer. Not just their knowledge and experience, but also their maturity, practical problem-solving skills and life perspective.

With advances in medical treatment, better awareness of the importance of exercise and diet to wellbeing, we are living longer lives and can be healthy and mentally active well into our 80's and 90's.

There's no reason why we shouldn't be working longer — and this should be our individual choice.

Bethan

I am now approaching my late 60's and I am still here, working as a technical communicator. My much younger team members are too polite to say anything, but there is a slight awkwardness at team meetings, as if my line manager and colleagues are not quite sure how to relate to me. My line manager is young enough to be my son.

Unfortunately, my partner has had health-related issues the past several years, which has meant that I am still supporting our household, so I can't afford to retire just yet.

Rob

A colleague of mine, a senior accountant in a well-known organisation, recently turned 65 years. He was told he needed to retire, even though he was willing to carry on working.

I think, when you get to a certain age, no matter how experienced you may be, there's a perception that maybe it is time for you to move over and let other, younger colleagues, have the opportunity to progress.

In a way, I can see why that makes sense from the organisation's perspective. My friend had been in the same role for 20 years. He was part of the furniture. But he was also quite set in his ways and not open to change. While he was around, his department couldn't really innovate.

Lauren

I am lucky enough to run my own business and gradually, over the past few years, my son has taken over most of the day-to-day tasks of handling clients and managing the technical communicators who work for us.

I am still active in the business, and come in every day, but allow my son and his management team to handle most of the nitty gritty. I pick up small items of work, take part in meetings and provide advice and support where needed.

That means I have more time for holidays, travel and other activities I am interested in.

Karen

Is life just about work? How long can you work before you say, enough is enough and there are other more important things in life?

Working on past retirement age is difficult for people with jobs that require hard physical labour or working in difficult environments, such as farm workers, miners, lorry drivers, fishermen, firemen, factory workers, and so on. With this type of work, I can't imagine why anyone would want to work past retirement age if they can afford to retire.

I also think it's wrong that people cling onto positions of influence and power until the grave un-prises their grasping fingers: politicians, tyrants, media moguls and heads of mega-businesses.

Between these two extremes lies a grey area, for people such as technical communicators, who can potentially work on past the "official" age of retirement, and may choose to do so, because they still have something to contribute, or they love their work too much to let go, or want to keep their mind and body active and engaged with the world as long as possible. ■

Editor's notes

"Often when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else."

source: Fred Rogers

In the UK, if you were born before 6th December 1953, then the official age of retirement is 65 years. The retirement age is 67 years for thoseborn after born after 5 April 1961. For those born after 6 April 1969, this will rise to 68 years.

When you decide to retire should be a personal choice, but remember the wise words of Abraham Lincoln:

"In the end it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."

Further reading below:

https://www.rights4seniors.net/content/guide-new-state-pension

Working after the State Pension Age: https://www.gov.uk/working-retirement-pension-age

Delaying retirement: Delay (defer) your State Pension

https://www.southernliving.com/culture/retirement-quotes

See what else we offer...

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