

Communication in its various forms

What is technical writing and how does it work?

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Communication takes place when two or more persons wish to pass on a message or other information to each other. It can take a wide variety of forms. In this modern day and age, communication normally involves presenting information in such a manner that its content is understood by the receiver of the information exactly as the sender intended. If the message communicated does not reach the recipient intact then the communication was defective at the very least.

Technical writing is the skill of presenting knowledge or information in a manner suitable for the purpose in hand, i.e. for communication purposes. To teach technical writing, i.e. communication, as a subject at universities and institutes of learning, the academic world has had to invent, define and clarify the terminology involved. (This is one form of language for special purposes.)

The communication itself also has a purpose: to provide information in a form suitable for the purpose in hand – also a language for special purposes.

Technical writing involves several principles:

- It must be pitched to suit the person for whom the information is intended;
- The recipient's existing level of knowledge on the subject must be clear; this level of knowledge must not be over- or underestimated if the communication is to reach the recipient fully intact;
- Any specialised terms used must be defined and explained to ensure that no misunderstandings arise.

Communication can only function successfully when the sender of the information and the receiver are using the same terms to mean the same things and both are able to understand the context. This defines the quality of the communication.

ISO 8402 defines "quality" as: "The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs."

In some reference sources, quality is referred to as "fitness for use" or "fitness for purpose" or "customer satisfaction" or "conformance to the requirements". Since these represent only certain facets of quality, fuller

explanations are usually required that eventually lead to the concept defined above.

These are the terms and definitions contained in ISO 8402. ISO 9000 interprets "quality" as being:

"An integration of the features and characteristics which determine the extent to which output satisfies the **customer's** needs." (It should be noticed that this definition has a great deal of **customer**-orientation. The features and characteristics of importance are determined by the customer. It is the customer who judges the extent to which these features and characteristics satisfy the customer's needs.) This is equivalent to the recipient of a message being required to define whether the communication was of the required quality or not.

Many years ago, I had to dash to Düsseldorf for a meeting with our management. I was not aware that it was no longer possible to buy a ticket at the counter. I had to use an automatic machine. The instructions shown behind the glass front of the machine were so full of specialised terminology that it required a great deal of effort on the reader's part just to understand them. I must have looked puzzled because a Turkish guest worker came to my assistance. He guided me through every step required to receive a ticket to the required destination. In the process he used gestures, pointed and still managed to give me exact details on how to proceed. Nor did he use any of the terminology given in the text and his knowledge of German grammar was even less than sketchy. Yet he showed me how to operate the ticket machine. I.e. the communication functioned perfectly. In other words the "quality" of the communication was good and totally fit for the purpose.

The EC Council Directive on the approximation of the laws of the member states relating to Machinery which provides the rulings for granting permission to use the CE emblem or symbol requires a declaration of conformity for the machinery in question. For the manufacturer and for the supplier of a machine destined for another European country, the product must be proven to be in accordance with European safety and health standards and must be certified.

For the first time ever, documentation is explicitly included within the scope of supply. The operating manual is moving more and more towards centre stage in European and national codes. Not only the EC Directive relating to Machinery, the law governing safety of equipment and the product liability but also many European standards contain requirements and indications for an operating manual which have to meet specific criteria.

Technical documentation of products as required in the Directive relating to Machinery, however, exceed by far the requirements made of operating

manuals. Thus, for example, the measures and technical solutions intended to prevent risks have to be documented and this documentation is now a central feature of the certification process for the declaration of conformity.

Since the major danger on the horizon when producing technical documentation is the question of product liability, the relevant documentation has to be provided in an appropriate form. It must be easy to understand. Whether this objective is achieved, and whether this then itself leads to successful results - influencing purchase decisions, producing excellent product reviews in consumer journals, or ensuring that a service technician always selects the correct spare parts whether he is working in Germany or Spain - depends to a very high degree on accurate and consistent terminology which can be understood by the recipient of the information. A further factor relates to the obligations placed on the manufacture by product liability laws to provide adequate, understandable documentation in the local language. Of particular relevance to enterprises operating in the EU are - as already stated - the Directive on Machinery and forthcoming EU legislation on services liability (to include translation and documentation). Faulty documentation can be an expensive matter for an enterprise because an error in the documentation is considered to be a defect in the product.

A young student of technical writing at a university in France chose as the subject of his diploma dissertation how to write technical instructions in a clear and understandable manner. The university failed him because his dissertation was not "couched in appropriate academic language". He appealed and his dissertation was finally accepted after a long fight - with very bad grace - but frightened many others off trying to express technical instructions in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Most technical personnel regard academic language as unintelligible gobbledegook. Official documents also tend towards high-flown, unintelligible prose when what is required is plain language that can be understood by a person of average intelligence. There is no need to dumb down the information but it is better to do so than to leave the reader asking what the message was that the text was trying to convey.

I once said that many students came into the profession not really knowing how to proceed. An academic informed me that I would have to engage in a certain degree of "cognitive restructuring". He was correct in what he said but he could have said it much more clearly.

Communication cannot be divorced from its cultural environment, its 'locale'.

For the CEN European standards project on quality criteria for the provision of translation services, I was given the task of recording the

terms used in the standard along with the definitions of these terms. The definition of "localisation" was one of terms which triggered off a lot of discussion. The definitions I found and my suggested compromise were:

- 1)** linguistic and cultural adaptation and translation of software applications, technical descriptions, user manuals, etc., for local markets. (ÖNORM D 1200)
- 2)** taking a product and making it linguistically and culturally appropriate to the target locale (country/region and language) where it will be used and sold." www.lisa.org
- 3)** transfer of a statement in the source language, which belongs to a source-language convention, into the equivalent or an appropriate target-language convention. (My version for the sake of clarity.)

There are also inexplicable differences in cultural conventions such as:

Brush and comb
Hot and cold
Red, white and blue
Salt and pepper

To vary the order of the wording will immediately point out to the native speaker that the text was written by a non-native.

The latest gems of officialese I have seen which could well give rise to problems of comprehension are:

Personenvereinzlungsanlage = Drehkreuz
Fahrtrichtungsanzeiger = Blinker
Postwertzeichengebinde = booklet of postage stamps

The object of communication is convey a message in an understandable form. It is not a means of demonstrating one's erudition or superiority. The British have an expression for it: "Call a spade a spade and not some kind of a shovel." What can anyone have against this approach?