



Building a Foundation

*Y*our success in every phase of your life will depend in part on how effectively you communicate, both orally and in writing. Technical communication has become an increasingly important area of communication in general. This chapter provides an overview of technical communication—its relevance and characteristics, the importance of ethical communication, the ways in which different cultures affect how you communicate, and effective communication in a team environment.

The Relevance of Technical Communication

You might think that a book about technical communication only applies to someone who intends to write a manual or sell a product. But did you know that the field includes the following types of communication?

- ◆ Letters or memos to, from, or between people who work in any kind of company, organization, or association, from multinational conglomerates to home-based businesses, and from professional or trade associations to charities such as the American Cancer Society.
- ◆ Advertising and promotional material, from magazine advertisements to business cards.
- ◆ A host of other documents, from the annual report of a firm such as General Motors to your own income tax return and from the operating and repair manuals for specialized equipment such as CAT scanners to the last parking ticket you received.

- ◆ Oral communication, from formally presenting a new product line to a large group of prospective clients to informally explaining your opinion at a small meeting.

You'll use technical communication throughout your professional and personal life. And the more effectively you communicate, the greater your likelihood of success. Suppose that you and your friend both study hard in a particular course and have some valuable ideas to contribute. If you have learned to express your ideas precisely and effectively but your friend hasn't, which of you is likely to get better grades? Similarly, if you are an employer deciding between two applicants with roughly equivalent qualifications and experience and only one demonstrates communication skills that will represent your organization well, which applicant will you hire?

As you read this book, think of it as a set of practical guidelines that can boost your chances of success in a wide range of areas.

Characteristics of Technical Communication



Visit the following two sites to learn more about the field of technical communication:

www.stc.org/The Society for Technical

Communication and

www.techcommonline.org

Journal of the Society for Technical Communication

In recent years, the field of technical communication has been developing a style of its own. This is particularly true of written material. We can clarify some of the distinctions between technical communication and what I will loosely label “traditional prose” by examining five salient features of technical communication:

- ◆ Necessity for a specific audience
- ◆ Integration of visual elements
- ◆ Ease of selective access
- ◆ Timeliness
- ◆ Structure

Necessity for a Specific Audience

Much traditional prose is what we might term author-driven. Someone makes a discovery, has a revelation, develops a theory, wants to share feelings with others, wishes to entertain, or simply believes that a particular story will generate profit by appealing to a large number of anonymous readers. And so the person begins to write, believing that there will be “an audience out there” who will want to read what he or she has written. But no one gets up one morning and says, “I want to write the definitive business letter” or “Today I’ll fulfill my dream of writing a lengthy report.”

Technical communication is **audience-driven**. People create it to respond to a specific audience’s need for information. Whether you are writing a letter, a memo, a report, or an e-mail, you always tailor it to a specific audience. In fact, if you don’t already know exactly who your audience is, you don’t really have

anything to say. The better you know your audience, the more effectively you'll be able to communicate. This principle also applies to oral technical communication.

Integration of Visual Elements

Great literature would be just as great if it were handwritten on loose-leaf pages rather than printed in a book. By contrast, the effectiveness of advertising or promotional material (such as a brochure, a flyer, or a sales presentation) relies at least as much on presentation as on content. The term *visual elements* refers to everything from illustrations, such as diagrams or charts, to headings and type. Careful integration of ideas and presentation is essential to effective technical communication.

Ease of Selective Access

Literary authors normally expect you to read every word, rather than to skim quickly, looking for the main points. They assume that you, as a reader, are willing to devote your full attention to the writing from start to finish. At the same time, you recognize that your understanding of the text is likely conditional on your having read all of it. By contrast, technical writers assume that readers will have other demands on their time and, as a result, may want to quickly identify only the principal points, perhaps returning later for a more careful reading.

If you are checking your office e-mail, for example, you're likely first to glance quickly at the header to see who sent the message and what it's about. In checking your advertising mail, you'll tend to scan for headings or other prominent words or phrases and, based on what you find, either delete the item or put it aside for later review. Effective technical communication allows the reader to make the choice without penalty. And it does so, in large part, through the judicious integration of visual elements.

Timeliness

The world's great books are supposed to be timeless, whereas the technicians' manuals for the Apple II or the IBM PC Jr are well past their expiration dates. Last year's Land's End catalog is of little use to consumers. By the middle of January, the newspaper advertisement for a Memorial Day sale has no practical value. And after you have received your merchandise, the online purchase order you filled out at Amazon.com has been reduced to bits and bytes of electronic rubbish. Almost without exception, the useful life of technical communication is relatively short. It is usually over as soon as the reality it addresses changes.

Structure

You might have been taught that a paragraph must have a topic sentence, one or more supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. You might also have been told never to begin a sentence with *and* or *but*. In contemporary technical communication, these rules don't apply. If you can express the idea of a paragraph in just

one sentence, you should do so. Also, in the interest of brevity and ease of your audience quickly acquiring the information, you may replace topic sentences with headings or subheadings. And most business and technical writers accept the practice of beginning some sentences with *and* or *but*. They also vary sentence length and structure to avoid monotony of style.

Ethics

What do we mean by ethics? **Ethics** can be defined as “the rules or standards of conduct that are believed to be right and moral for individuals, organizations, or societies.” Unfortunately, though, there is no consensus as to the meaning and implications of conduct that is “right and moral.” Do you and your family and friends always agree on what is “right”? Does *moral* mean the same thing to every individual, organization, and society?

Over the centuries, philosophers have wrestled with questions about morality and conduct and with the meaning of ethics. More recent attention has been focused on the development and meaning of medical ethics, professional ethics, journalistic ethics, business ethics (which some people facetiously consider an oxymoron), and so on. Can we derive from a confusing but important maze of ideas any practical guidance for those who engage in technical communication?

Ethical Communication

However we define ethics, most of us have a sense of what we consider right and wrong, and most of us would agree that most of the time we should try to apply the injunction “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Most successful people believe that treating others as justly as possible is one of the cornerstones of their success. How might this approach be reflected in technical communication? Here are a few examples.

Honesty. Many of us know someone who lied on a résumé and got the job because of the lie. We often forget that, in most cases, the lie is eventually discovered and the person loses not only the job but also his or her reputation. Telling someone that “the check is in the mail” when it isn’t may bring short-term benefits. But if you persist in this kind of deception, you’ll soon be thought of as dishonest. Being dishonest in dealing with others is illegal in some cases; for most people, it is always unethical.

Accuracy. An important criterion for technical communicators is accuracy of information. If your document or presentation contains inaccuracies and if someone in your audience notices the errors, your entire message—and likely any future ones—is compromised. Whenever you communicate, your credibility is on the line. Regaining lost credibility is very difficult indeed. If the lack of accuracy in what you communicate is intentional, the issue becomes one of honesty and, thus, of ethics.

Exaggeration. Whether you're trying to sell a product or express an opinion, you should certainly try to present your information in the best possible light. You might do this, for example, by accentuating the advantages of your brand and glossing over its weaknesses. Similarly, in describing your preferred option, you might use more forceful vocabulary than you use in describing the alternatives. Here the question of ethics tends to be one of degree. Only a technical audience is likely to be swayed by neutral facts alone. Consequently, when you wish to persuade—and technical communication certainly involves persuasion—you must in some sense exaggerate.

Communication that exaggerates beyond what is reasonable, however, may be scorned. Of course, deciding what is “reasonable” can be difficult. Think of the difference between what you would consider “reasonable exaggeration” in a loan application and what you accept (despite the apparent absurdity of the claims) in advertisements for cars or toothpaste. For the sake of both expediency and your reputation, adopt an ethical approach at all times.

Creating Impressions. Whenever it conveys information, language also creates impressions. Consciously or unconsciously, audiences respond to the emotional effect of language (its connotation) as well as to its objective meaning (its denotation). Thus, the way you phrase a communication will influence how your audience responds to it. (Think of the importance of spin doctors in political circles.) Suppose that you are a manager in a company and your record shows that three-quarters of your decisions have proved to be good ones. To describe your success rate, we could say that you are right 75 percent of the time or we could say that you are wrong 25 percent of the time. Which description would you prefer to see in your personnel file?

As in the case of exaggeration, the ethical path may be indistinct. In most cases, technical communication requires you to be as objective as possible even though the nature of language itself makes it all but impossible to present communications that are entirely free of connotation.

Codes of Ethics

The importance of ethical conduct in business and in technological fields is broadly accepted. In fact, organizations ranging from businesses to self-regulating professional associations publish codes of ethical conduct. A group of international business leaders, primarily from Europe, Japan, and the United States, have developed what they called the Caux Round Table Principles for Business. Effectively a code of ethics, it states that

While accepting the legitimacy of trade secrets, businesses should recognize that sincerity, candor, truthfulness, the keeping of promises, and transparency contribute not only to their own credibility and stability but also to the smoothness and efficiency of business transactions, particularly on the international level.



Visit
[www.cauxroundtable.org/
english.htm](http://www.cauxroundtable.org/english.htm) to see the
complete Caux Round
Table Principles for
Business.

The Society for Technical Communication makes the following statement in its Code for Communicators:

My commitment to professional excellence and ethical behavior means that I will:

- ◆ Use language and visuals with precision.
- ◆ Prefer simple, direct expression of ideas.
- ◆ Satisfy the audience's need for information, not my own need for self-expression.
- ◆ Hold myself responsible for how well my audience understands my message.
- ◆ Respect the work of colleagues, knowing that a communication problem may have more than one solution.
- ◆ Strive continually to improve my professional competence.
- ◆ Promote a climate that encourages the exercise of professional judgment and that attracts talented individuals to careers in technical communication.

Conclusions

As an ethical communicator, you have to be willing to put the needs of your audience before your own interests. Twisting language to camouflage an unsavory truth may produce the results you want, but you should not ignore the potential repercussions. Rarely are ethical people comfortable with the rationalization that the end justifies the means.

To determine whether or not you are communicating ethically, try asking yourself how you would react if you were the audience. Would you think you were being treated fairly and respectfully? If you can't honestly answer yes, then it's likely that you haven't given sufficient thought to the ethical aspects of your communication.

Diversity

The United States is a society characterized by **diversity**—a society made up of people characterized by a variety of cultures, age groups, interests, and physical abilities. With at least 300 different cultures in the United States, you can be certain that the American workforce of the twenty-first century will be more diverse than at any other time in history.

In addition, the continuing increase in international trade and global markets will require many American workers to communicate effectively with people around the world. To work effectively with people from different backgrounds and experiences, you must learn to recognize, understand, and respect differences.

Cultural Referents

People, ideas, and things that form part of the popular culture and become ingrained in our thinking and in our language are referred to as **cultural referents**. As a technical communicator, you must consider whether your audience will understand the cultural referents that you take for granted. For example, an audience that has not been exposed to the Grade 1 primers common in the 1950s and 1960s would probably not know that a “Dick and Jane approach” is one that is overly simplistic.

The multicultural nature of our society means that you must pay attention to the cultural referents you use and consider whether they are relevant to your intended audience. If your audience doesn’t relate to them as you do, you will not communicate effectively.

Cultural Preferences

Just as people respond differently to cultural referents, groups tend to react differently to certain types of behavior. People of different cultures tend to have different preferences for the way they interact in business and social situations. Knowledge of your audience and their preferences will help you develop worthwhile professional relationships.

Formality. The use of first names in newly established business relationships is very common in the United States. Presumably, this behavior is designed to promote an impression of friendliness and conviviality. It is not, however, universally accepted. Many cultures believe that business relationships should be more formal, and that the appropriate form of address—even among people who know each other quite well—is a last name preceded by an honorific such as *Ms.* or *Mr.* Unless you know your audience’s preferences, you run the risk of being thought impolite if you use first names in business relationships.

Directness. Another characteristic of American business dealings is the value placed on directness. Thus, brevity and conciseness are seen as desirable qualities in letters and memos. In some other cultures, these same qualities would be regarded as brusque, curt, or abrasive. In Japan, for example, tradition dictates a much more roundabout approach in which ideas are conveyed through implication rather than stated explicitly.

Language. As a technical communicator, you need to consider language in your communications. For example, although English is the language of the United States, Canada, and England, some words are spelled differently. When writing to a Canadian business, which should you use—Canadian or American spelling? Again, consider both your audience and your purpose. You should also be aware of differences in vocabulary. For example, if you are writing to someone in England, you will be better understood if you use the words *lift*, *boot*, and *biscuit*, rather than *elevator*, *trunk* (of a car), and *cookie*, respectively. Nor should you be shocked if someone from England offers to “knock you up” at 7 A.M. It’s



The University of Maryland's Diversity Database is a comprehensive index of multicultural and diversity resources. Visit www.inform.umd.edu/EdRes/Topic/Diversity

simply that person's way of proposing a wake-up call. Another language consideration involves communication with people who speak English as a second language. In this situation, you should be careful not to use slang or jargon that might not be understood.

Humor. Because humor plays at best a minor role in technical communication, you should exercise care in its use. The same caution applies to references to religion and politics. North Americans tend to approach such references with what, for some cultures, is inappropriate familiarity. Unless you are certain of your audience's reaction, you should avoid potentially offensive references in your communications—in other words, stick to the facts.

Personal Space. The term *personal space* is often used to refer to the physical distance we like to maintain between ourselves and those with whom we are speaking. Different cultures have different norms. Many Europeans and South Americans, for example, prefer much less personal space than most North Americans find comfortable. When you see two people from different cultures talking, you might observe one advancing to decrease the personal space and the other backing up in an effort to increase it. Although the issue of personal space does not have a direct bearing on written technical communication, it is a good idea to be aware of the cultural differences involved.

Eye Contact. A related issue is eye contact. Most North Americans believe that looking someone in the eye while conversing is an indication of honesty and forthrightness. In some other cultures, however, such behavior can be viewed as rude or presumptuous. Although you should make eye contact with your audience during a presentation, you should not assume that your audience's failure to reciprocate implies shiftiness or deceit.

Teams and Collaboration

In today's workplace, as much as 75 percent of your time may be spent working in a group. Today teams are a common way of doing business. You may be asked to cooperate with a coworker to write a report, to solve a problem, or to make a presentation. When workers cooperate in completing a project, it is called **collaboration**. Collaboration, or teamwork, offers the following advantages:

- ◆ *Shared expertise.* People in a group complement each other by providing different proficiency levels, knowledge, and skills.
- ◆ *Shared responsibility.* Team members share the credit or blame for the outcome of their work, resulting in a high degree of accountability.
- ◆ *Varied perspectives on a problem.* Different viewpoints come together to offer a variety of perspectives and solutions.
- ◆ *Flexibility.* After a problem is solved or a project is completed, a team can be disbanded and reassigned as needed.

Characteristics of Teams

A group of people put together to complete a given task do not automatically work as a team. A group must learn to become a team. A successful team is composed of members who give mutual support to each other. When you become a member of a team, you can do several things to help the group function effectively. The Checklist below provides guidelines for working in a team.



Effective Teamwork

- ✓ Work cooperatively.
 - ✓ Channel conflict constructively.
 - ✓ Be supportive of the team's purpose.
 - ✓ Work toward the team's common goals.
 - ✓ State your opinions with sensitivity for other team members.
 - ✓ Be a good listener.
 - ✓ Share your knowledge and skills.
 - ✓ Keep an open mind.
 - ✓ Come to team meetings prepared.
 - ✓ Maintain a positive attitude.
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Collaborative Problem Solving and Writing

Often teams are made up of people from various departments in an organization and are set up to solve a specific problem. After the team has analyzed the problem and is ready to propose a solution, team members usually work collaboratively to prepare a written report and/or oral presentation for management. To successfully solve a problem, a team needs to:

- ◆ Define the problem.
- ◆ Research and analyze the problem.
- ◆ Brainstorm alternatives.
- ◆ Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of alternatives.
- ◆ Make a final recommendation.
- ◆ Create an action plan to implement the recommendations.

Coworkers may also be called on to write together. Teams who work together to create a written product use a process called **collaborative writing**. Reports, brochures, and presentations are just a few examples of the documents you may create collaboratively. Typically, teams work together first to brainstorm and

discuss the content, purpose, audience, and organization of their document. Then each team member may be assigned a specific section to write or task to complete.

After individual tasks are complete, the team may regroup to edit and revise each other's work. This process is known as **peer editing**. Finally, one or more individuals are assigned to prepare the final document.

Virtual Teams

In today's workplace, teams do not necessarily have face-to-face group meetings. Instead, teams use various types of technology to discuss a problem or collaborate on a project. **Virtual teams** communicate and complete their work using a combination of technology tools, or **groupware**. Commonly used tools include **teleconferencing** and **videoconferencing**, **e-mail**, networked **electronic meeting software**, and **collaborative writing software** (CWS). CWS allows two or more team members to work on a document at the same time.

One of the greatest challenges to virtual teams is keeping track of schedules, documents, and lines of communication. To help manage the process and work flow, teams can establish virtual office space on the Web. A number of commercial sites allow subscribers to pay a monthly fee to share office space. Features include shared file and storage space, discussion groups, calendars, synchronized chats in private conference rooms, and bulletin boards.

..... Chapter Review

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Technical communication includes many different types of written documents, (such as letters, memos, advertising and promotional material, and manuals) and various types of oral communication. Technical communication has five salient features: necessity for a specific audience, integration of visual elements, ease of selective access, timeliness, and structure.

Many organizations have codes of ethics, and technical communicators should practice ethical conduct in their messages. Communications should be honest and accurate and should put the needs of the audience first.

The diversity of the U.S. workforce and the increase in international trade will require American workers to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds and experiences. As a technical communicator, you must be sure that your audience understands your cultural referents and that you are aware of cultural preferences. People of different cultures have different attitudes toward formality, directness, language, humor, personal space, and eye contact.

Working in teams is common in today's workplace. Advantages to teamwork, or collaboration, include shared expertise, shared responsibility, varied perspectives on a problem, and flexibility. A team needs to define the problem, research and analyze the problem, brainstorm alternatives, evaluate alternatives, make a final recommendation, and create an action plan to implement the recommendation. Virtual teams collaborate on projects using various types of technology.

KEY TERMS

Audience-driven	E-mail
Collaboration	Ethics
Collaborative writing	Groupware
Collaborative writing software	Peer editing
Cultural referents	Teleconferencing
Diversity	Videoconferencing
Electronic meeting software	Virtual teams

CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITIES

1. Give four or more examples of what could be classified as technical communication.
2. Describe at least one real-world situation in which technical communication skills would serve you well.

3. Briefly explain the significance of the following characteristics of effective technical communication: (a) necessity for a specific audience, (b) integration of visual elements, (c) ease of selective access, (d) timeliness, and (e) structure.
4. Briefly discuss the importance of ethics in technical communication, referring specifically to the issues of honesty, accuracy, exaggeration, and the creation of impressions.
5. Discuss how ethics played a role in a situation from your own experience.
6. Give two or more examples of cultural referents that you take for granted, and suggest alternatives for an audience that might not understand them.
7. Reflect on an experience you've had as part of a team. What were the strengths and weaknesses of your team? What characteristics of effective teams did you experience?

SKILLS APPLICATIONS

1. Talk to someone in business or government who is involved in hiring new employees, and report back to your class on what that person thinks are the most important ethical issues in his or her workplace.
2. Visit <http://csep.iit.edu/codes/codes.html> (the Illinois Institute of Technology's Center for Study of Ethics in the Professions) and www.ethics.ubc.ca/resources/professional/codes.html (the Centre for Applied Ethics). View at least ten codes of ethics from various professions. Then write your own personal code of ethics for the workplace.
3. You have just been informed that the empty cubicle next to you will soon be occupied by a new employee from your company's international headquarters. Create a fictitious person and assign this person a name and nationality. Conduct research to discover the cultural differences you should expect. Assume this person has a working knowledge of English but no real day-to-day experience with the language or with American culture. What will you do to simplify communication between the two of you? Summarize your findings in an e-mail to your supervisor.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES CASE

Dealing with Differences. During a crowded cocktail party in Mexico, Elaine noticed her business client waving to her from across the room. Talking with someone else, she saw the wave and thought "How friendly!" and waved back. A little later he waved again—more adamantly and vigorously. She waved back more enthusiastically this time. In the days that followed, her client wouldn't return phone calls and canceled appointments with her. Why do you think the client became cool to her?

CASE STUDIES

In the subsequent chapters of this book, you will look at examples of technical communication involving one or more of four organizations based on real companies and institutions. Each case study presents examples of flawed communication produced by people within the organizations under consideration. The section entitled “Issues to Think About” presents questions raised by the examples. The following paragraphs provide profiles of the four organizations.

Grandstone Technical Institute (GTI)

GTI offers one- and two-year certificates or diplomas in such fields as management information systems and engineering technology as well as internship programs in such areas as automotive mechanics, electronics, and welding. GTI’s reputation for excellence is such that its graduates are often welcomed by companies across the country.

Ann Arbor University (AAU)

AAU offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees, principally in arts, law, and engineering. One result of the university’s successful fund-raising campaigns was the construction of a new Student Association Building. The Ann Arbor University Student Association Executive (AAUSAEEx) remains very active in promoting cooperation among student associations across the country.

Accelerated Enterprises Ltd. (AEL)

In 1980, two young engineers, Sarah Cohen and Frank Nabata, opened a small consulting practice optimistically named Accelerated Enterprises Ltd. Over the next two decades, business prospered. Cohen and Nabata (now married) took in a number of associates and opened three branches. With the expansion came broadened expertise, and AEL is now involved in chemical, civil, and geological engineering as well as software design and development. While the original partners still oversee the firm’s overall strategy, they believe in allowing their branch associates significant latitude in running the local operations. As well, AEL tries to maintain good working relationships with several postsecondary institutions, viewing them as important contributors to the country’s economic growth and as likely sources for future AEL consultants and employees.

Radisson Automobiles Inc. (RAI)

RAI is a highly successful automobile dealership chain. Over the years, RAI has prospered, and in 1990, Maurice Radisson turned the stewardship of the business over to his eldest son, Griffin, who holds an automotive mechanics diploma from GTI and an MBA from AAU. As president and chief executive officer, Griffin built his father’s dealership into a wealthy and respected cross-country network. To strengthen RAI’s image as a good corporate citizen, he favors establishing relationships with postsecondary institutions.