

The Case Against Defining Technical Writing

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Ongoing attempts to define technical writing are inevitably confounded by problems caused by an excessively broad focus, which obscures the basis and usefulness of the definition, or by an excessively narrow focus, which arbitrarily—and sometimes oddly—relegates samples of writing as in or out of the realm of technical writing. Technical writers have been doing their jobs for far too long without a definition to be satisfied with a one- or two-sentence catch-all definition, and such a definition may result in dividing technical writing into two (or more) cultures.

It is essential [to] understand that definitions are hypotheses and that embedded in each is a particular philosophical or political or epistemological point of view. It is certainly true that he who holds the power to define is our master, but it is also true that he who holds in mind an alternative definition can never quite be his slave.

—Neil Postman, "Defending Against the Indefensible"

A recent issue of *Technical Communication* records the debate over whether a cookbook that was disqualified from the Twin Cities' Society for Technical Communication's (STC's) technical-publications competition because of its subject matter should, indeed, have been allowed as an entry. Arguing that the cookbook *is* technical writing, the author of the cookbook writes, "What can be more technical than a two-page description of the complete home process of making butter? . . . Or, how [to] make soap?" (Carlson 85). Defending the judges' decision to disqualify the cookbook because it is *not* technical writing, Mary Fae McKay responds:

Those of us involved in the management of STC's competitions readily admit our difficulty in drawing the line between "technical" and nontechnical communications. . . . Would Stan Carlson's cookbook have been found technical if it had explained the use of a microwave oven to make such recipes or if it had included nutritional information? "Yes," say the organizers of the Twin Cities competition. . . . The basic criterion that the competition managers . . . have been using is the following: Is this the kind of document that STC members produce for pay and themselves regard as technical communication? (86)

In order to agree with the decision to disqualify the cookbook, we must conclude that STC's members do not write cookbooks—at least not for pay—and do not regard cookbooks as technical writing. I, for one, believe cookbooks are technical writing—regardless of whether they mention microwaves or nutrition and regardless of whether their authors get paid for the work. Would my volunteering

to write—without pay—a software manual for a corporation disqualify the work as technical writing?

The judges of the Twin Cities' competition are not alone, however, in their frustrated efforts to define technical writing. Theorists and practitioners of the discipline have considered numerous components that such a definition should include; however, no definition of technical writing has emerged as universally acceptable. In fact, in 1989, STC's board members identified constructing such a definition as one of the objectives of their strategic plan for determining future goals of the organization. Ironically, the board members dropped this objective when differences about the definition could not be reconciled. According to William Leavitt, 1989 president of STC, the problem of constructing a definition will soon be referred to the academic branch of the Society.

The ongoing endeavors to construct this definition—or at least to identify the prominent characteristics that it should include—seem to insist that such a definition is possible, despite the history of foiled attempts to create one.

This article focuses on the issue of defining technical writing by, first, showing why a definition would be useful; next, discussing the most popular, previous definitions of the field; and, then, investigating the problems with defining technical writing. The final segment of the article focuses on the disadvantages of constructing this definition, arguing that we should abandon the search for one altogether.

Usefulness of Defining Technical Writing

Excellent reasons exist, beyond establishing guidelines for entries in publications competitions, for wanting to distinguish technical writing from other forms of writing. Certainly, for instance, some form of a definition would be useful in clarifying the bounds of our academic programs and our research. How, for instance, can we legitimately compare academic programs when we are not exactly sure what technical writing entails? Further, what topics are appropriate for researchers in technical writing to investigate within their field? The issue of definition may seem even more pressing when we consider the recent expansion of our field from a focus on individual writers and their writing to a focus on all the other technical-support personnel involved in the communication process and in nonwriting tasks, such as illustrations, communications management, public relations, editing, computer analysis and programming, researching, and so on. How does this expansion fit into a definition of technical writing?

Besides establishing boundaries for academic programs and research, a definition could provide the basis for establishing the professional status of technical communication. While much of the literature about professionalism and technical writing has focused on the issue of certification (see, for example, Malcolm; Harbaugh; Gordon), I would agree with those who suggest that true professionalism comes from dedicated service to the ideals of the profession—ideals that could be conveyed in a definition of technical writing,

should we ever find one that could accommodate the variety of professional activities practiced by members of the profession.

Previous Definitions of Technical Writing

A review of the previous attempts to define technical writing reveals a universal problem: Each of these definitions focuses on a single aspect of technical writing, using this aspect as the basis for distinguishing technical writing from all other genres of writing. Some definitions stress only subject matter, some style, and some still other variables. Rather than catalog all prior definitions, I will point out just two articles valuable for their reviews of these definitions: W. Earl Britton's "What Is Technical Writing? A Redefinition" and David Dobrin's "What's Technical about Technical Writing?" (For representative essays on the definition of technical writing, see Dandridge; Harris; Hays; Hogan; Kelley and Masse; Limaye; MacIntosh; Stratton; Walter; Zall.)

In his article, Britton reviews categories of definitions—those based on subjects, linguistics, thought processes, or purposes—calling each category "significant and useful," though he does not point out the weaknesses of the definitions (11). He then defines technical writing as communication that has "one meaning and only one meaning" (11). Britton's definition hinges on the notion of objectivity in writing—that precisely chosen words put together in precisely the right way will be interpreted by all readers to mean precisely the same thing. Those who argue against Britton's definition point out—quite obviously, I think—the unlikeliness of any utterance meaning exactly the same thing to all readers; after all, readers bring a wealth of experiences and background variables to their understanding of utterances that necessarily affect all their interpretations of meaning—as those who have attempted to create a mathematical language have found.

More recently, Dobrin also chronicles many of the previous attempts to define technical writing, noting their common offense:

The definers of technical writing don't collect [information] systematically. Instead, they rely on a vast experience to govern the formulations they give us: they use a retrospective, intuitive, conservative procedure. They assume that something called technical writing exists, that it will change slowly, and that the bounds of their experience approximate the bounds of the corpus. They assume, in other words, that their experience is sufficient to comprehend . . . the texts they assemble and that those texts are in fact what technical writing is. But there is no reason to believe that their experience is complete, nor to believe that we can get at their experience in its totality with a few well-chosen words. So why should we depend on that experience for a definition? ("What's Technical" 229)

Later in his article, Dobrin creates his own definition: "Technical writing is writing that accommodates technology to the user" ("What's Technical" 242), a behaviorist definition that is flawed with the same kind of experience-based assumptions for which

Dobrin has criticized others. Like the definitions he criticizes, Dobrin's definition stems from untested observations that present no evidence of any kind of systematic study. Further, there is little in Dobrin's article that makes his definition accessible since Dobrin's definition hinges on the explanation that "What is technical about technical writing is technology, to the extent that technology defines certain human behaviors among certain human beings and defines a group" ("What's Technical" 242). Finally, his arguments against using clarity, accuracy, and conciseness as requisites of technical writing are undermined by his own, often too complex, prose. The basic tenets of technical writing tell us, for instance, that in articulating a definition, writers should present straightforward ideas in straightforward terms. But Dobrin's definition is circular—the definition itself must be explained, and this explanation is as difficult as the original definition.

Problems with Defining Technical Writing

One of the problems with our attempts to define technical writing is the recognition that we cannot agree on the proper inflection of the term we are trying to define. Is it *technical* writing, implying that we write about technology as the sole subject matter, or is it *technical writing*, implying that we follow stringent rules in the practice of writing, regardless of subject matter?

This primary debate about the proper inflection of the term continues and, in fact, gives rise to a second problem: We cannot seem to agree on the parameters of the discipline. What, exactly, do the words *technical writing* mean—divorced from any attempt to explain the discipline? In other words, what would constitute the *technical* part and what would constitute the *writing* part of a definition?

The problem with inflection is clearly illustrated by the earlier example of the cookbook's exclusion from the technical-publications competition. The judges of the Twin Cities' STC's technical-publications competition, for example, chose to stress the word *technical*, depending etymologically on the word *technology*. These judges seem to require some kind of highly specialized subject matter—far more specialized, evidently, than making butter or soap—for a piece of writing to fit within their definition of technical writing. Other people, such as Carlson, stress the word *writing*; thus, if a writer writes about a subject in the same style and format and for the same purpose that a technical writer writes about a subject (e.g., writes a set of instructions in the imperative mood with consecutive, readable steps that give uninitiated readers the information necessary for performing a process), then that writer creates a piece of technical writing—regardless of whether the process or the subject concerns technology.

Interestingly enough, there are computer software programs, with their accompanying on-line documentation, that are cookbooks. *Dinner at Eight*[™], for instance, gives recipes from famous restaurants in the Far East, France, Mexico, New York, San Francisco, and

New Orleans—plus recipes for low calorie/low sodium dishes; ideas and recipes for dinner parties, foods to grill, intimate dinners, and fast-food dishes; discussions of wine; and conversions to and from US and metric measures (Johnston and Monaco). I could certainly be wrong, but I suspect that had Carlson presented his cookbook as such a documented software package, his writing would have been found acceptable for the Twin Cities' STC's technical-publications competition. If this is true, the issue concerning the *technical* part of the term may have as much or more to do with form than with content—a nasty little twist to the whole inflection question and one that Carlson recognizes.

More to the point, of course, a definition that is totally content dependent will invariably have to specify what content is technical and what content is not, and that dilemma will leave us no better off than we are now in trying to define technical writing. Further, a content-dependent definition would focus on what the writing is about (a focus that would lead to a stagnant definition) rather than on what the writing does (a focus that would lead to an active definition). Because technical writing is a recursive process—an ongoing relationship of messages created, formatted, sent, interrupted, received, evaluated, and responded to—it seems pretty clear that any definition of technical writing should focus on what the writing does and not on what the writing is about.

I do not mean to suggest that subject matter has no place in a definition of technical writing, but only that it cannot be used as the sole criterion for excluding works from the realm of technical writing—just as it would be absurd to use subject matter as the sole criterion for including works within the realm of technical writing. All writing about technology, after all, is certainly not technical writing. Even without a definition, we are astute enough to see that a short story describing the process a boy employs to care lovingly for his first car is not technical writing. Thus, subject matter clearly raises more questions than it resolves as a criterion for a definition.

In addition to disagreeing on the parameters of the *technical* part of the term, we also have problems with the *writing* part of the term as this part relates to style (clarity, accuracy, conciseness, objectivity) and purpose (to inform or to persuade). Most of us would agree, for instance, that Ernest Hemingway's style is dominated by clarity and conciseness, though we would hardly call him a technical writer. For obvious reasons, accuracy must be ignored in a consideration of Hemingway's fictive style, but it does not seem to be problems with accuracy that prevent us from calling Hemingway a technical writer. Hemingway's purpose for writing and the readers' purposes for reading, combined with the fictive understandings of the writer/reader relationship, keep us from thinking of Hemingway as a technical writer. Certainly, it is not because he wrote about nontechnical subject matter—wars and bullfights—that we have disqualified him as a technical writer.

Others have indicated their frustrations with style-dependent definitions of technical writing. Carolyn Miller, for instance, points out

that using clarity as the sole touchstone for technical writing—relegating the entire issue of communication to clarity—necessitates a positivist perspective. Adopting, momentarily, this positivist perspective, Miller explains:

Language provides a view out onto the real world, a view which may be clear or obfuscated. If language is clear, then we see reality accurately: if language is highly decorative or opaque, then we see what is not really there or we see it with difficulty. (612)

As important as clarity is, and it surely deserves a prominent place in our discussions of definitions of technical writing, Miller finds that communication requires a great deal more than only a clear window-pane. Communication also requires rhetorical savvy; invention strategies; appropriate points of view that accommodate different kinds of interactions with the subjects; and flexible senses of the writer/reader relationships that can be adapted to a variety of subjects, purposes, styles, and formats. These requirements for effective communication give the writer options rather than formulas for communicating (Miller 613-15).

In "What's Difficult about Teaching Technical Writing," Dobrin also notes a paradox relating to style implicit in teaching technical writing: "The teacher of technical writing is teaching the student to perform for his or her peers in a particular technical community, a community of which the teacher is not . . . a member" (137). Thus, the teacher's understanding of the concept of clarity may conflict with the norms of the technical or scientific community for which the student will be eventually writing. Though techniques of style may clarify a topic for teachers or lay readers, certain techniques that are not suited to technical or scientific readers may actually impair these readers' understanding. Thus, clarity may be one of the essential components of a definition of technical writing, but a scientist's means of producing clarity may depend on field-specific conventions—appropriate uses of jargon, passive voice, and so on—that violate the technical-writing teacher's prescriptions.

As we have seen, attempts to define technical writing by style alone are problematic, and producing empirical research to support these attempts seems inherently troublesome because analyses of style require evaluation—measures of techniques that frequently lead to judgments about the goodness or badness of a piece of writing (Miller 614). In other words, do we define technical writing by what it *should* be? Or do we define it by its most typical applications—in software documentation and income tax forms, for example—that are frequently poorly written? Consider, further, the difficulties with choosing texts to assess as examples of technical writing in empirical research. Can we analyze any piece of writing about technology as a representative sample of technical writing? Can we take any document written by a technical writer and presume it is suitably representative for our research?

These questions, unanswerable for now, simply lead to other equally disturbing questions. If we define technical writing only in

terms of subject matter, how are we going to make necessary distinctions between good and bad technical writing? Is, for instance, a wordy, incoherent manual on installing computers still technical writing? According to those who define technical writing by subject matter only, the answer to this last question must be "yes." Some, perhaps, would argue that the answer is a qualified "yes," noting that the manual is a sample of *bad* technical writing.

In addition, distinguishing between good and bad technical writing according to whether it achieves its purpose is not a clear enough criterion for defining technical writing, since many poorly written manuals do eventually achieve their purposes but not before thoroughly irritating their readers. Is there, then, a time limit on how quickly the writer must accommodate the reader's needs? These issues are troubling, and they demonstrate the problems with basing definitions of technical writing on style.

The final problem with definitions of technical writing that emphasize the *writing* part of the term over the *technical* part of the term addresses the question of purpose. Initially, the issue of the writer's purpose seems to be less problematic with technical writing than with other forms of writing. For instance, we know that, in general, most technical writers write to communicate important information to readers who need this information. But what, exactly, is involved in the process of communication? We certainly have numerous models, or attempts at models, that try to explain communication; many of these models, however, are just as unsatisfactory as our attempts to define technical writing. Thus, we eventually whittle down the question of purpose to the role of purpose in specific works, but the possible answers to our question still degenerate into simplistic options: to inform or to persuade. Most of us would be hard pressed to give an example of a strictly informative piece of writing—one that has no tinges of persuasion.

Even if we do adopt the simplistic inform/persuade restriction on the technical writer's purpose, the biggest difficulty is that these two purposes are hardly exclusive to technical writing. Journalists inform; advertisers persuade. What kind of boundaries can we construct that will not overlap with these other areas? Even if we add something about "technological subject matter" to the equation, we still have to concede that journalists wrote quite ably about the technical aspects of the Challenger disaster. We must also concede that advertisers have done a pretty good job of describing some of the latest technological wizardry that has led to the comfort and performance of our new cars, while encouraging our desire to possess these cars.

Thus, we see that yet another criterion—the inform/persuade restriction—has vanished as the sole device for constructing a definition of technical writing. Combining criteria based on subject matter, style, and purpose seems most logical at this stage, but such a combination leaves us exactly where we are now: still arguing about what constitutes the components of the individual criteria.

Disadvantages of Defining Technical Writing

At this point in our field's development and in our discussion, a satisfactory definition of technical writing eludes us. It strikes many as ironic—if not downright embarrassing—that a discipline that so frequently constructs definitions cannot muster one for its own enterprise. Before we continue with attempts to define technical writing, however, we should consider the potential disadvantages of doing so, beyond the problems already noted.

Primarily, definitions draw lines: *This* is and *that* isn't. We should be careful, in our earnest desire to create a definition, not to exclude or disenfranchise writing that falls outside our strict categories. I am thinking, in particular, about the cookbook incident and the potential for similar distinctions that serve no purpose other than to separate certain kinds of writing—and eventually writers—from the central core of technical writing, this core being concerned primarily with the creation of software documentation, instructions for building engines, and so on.

Where does cookbook writing fall in a continuum of writing? It does not fall within the fields of fiction, science writing, business writing, poetry, drama, editorial writing, advertising, press releases, reviews, or any other form of writing with which I am familiar. I am not suggesting that we should gather all forms of writing for which we do not have a specific category and place them within the field of technical writing. Rather, I am suggesting that we should reconsider works, like Carlson's cookbook, that fall so naturally in line with almost all the criteria we claim for technical writing before we exclude these works for violating a single criterion.

Further, some attempts at defining technical writing seem frighteningly reminiscent of the attitudes that led to the split between the sciences and the humanities—the two divergent spheres called "the two cultures" by C. P. Snow—because of the exclusionary tone that seems to accompany such distinctions: If you do not write about something that can be plugged in to an electrical outlet or sold to the government, then you do not qualify as a technical writer—for which you can read, "one of us." Certainly, no one would argue that either the sciences or the humanities have benefited from their cultural separation from one another, and certainly a split in the discipline of technical writing engendered by our attempts to define the term would be just as harmful as previous cultural splits. It seems ironic, considering the role technical writing often plays as the bridge between the sciences and humanities, that we should be so close to creating, if not actively pursuing, our own split based on a restrictive definition of what we do.

Most telling of all, perhaps, is not the number of writing specialists concerned with defining the discipline, but the number who are *unconcerned* with this endeavor. I suspect that many technical writers recognize that they will continue to do the work they have always done regardless of the status of our attempts at a definition. How-

ever, other writing specialists have moved on to address more pressing needs of the genre, such as the need for a theoretical framework for technical writing (Moran and Journet ix), the need for empirical evaluations of the traditional do's and don'ts we teach (Moran and Moran 313), and other theoretical and practical concerns (Smith).

At the risk of being called a naysayer, I must contend that no definition will adequately describe what we do. The historical problems surrounding any attempt at constructing a definition will continue to foil efforts to come up with the perfect definition of technical writing, and we have been doing our jobs for far too long without a definition to conceive of one that will accurately reflect all the activities we perform. Further, I think it's reasonable to predict that the past and present variations in our jobs are negligible compared to the variations the future will bring. How will a definition of technical writing accommodate new technology? Will hypermedia, on-line documentation, and other technological innovations be included or excluded from this definition? How will we decide?

It would be far better to keep our field intact—with our impressionistic, experience-based ideas of what technical writing encompasses—than to succumb to simplistic or exclusionary definitions that separate us from one another. Perhaps, therefore, we need to get over our embarrassment at not having a perfect definition and abandon the search for it altogether.

In the event I am wrong—in the event that some sort of definition is possible that will describe all we do while avoiding a disciplinary split—I predict that the definition will not be a handy one- or two-sentence catch-all. Rather, I think it will have to be an extensive and flexible definition that will represent the complexities and delicate balances of content, purpose, style, format, and all the other components of successful technical writing—not only the components of current technical-writing practices, but those of the twenty-first century as well.

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