

**TECHNICAL  
COMMUNICATION  
THEORY: AN OVERVIEW**

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is now over a decade since the publication of *New Essays in Technical and Scientific Communication*, a collection of essays intended to set a new standard for the three subdisciplines in the field: research, practice, and theory. In their introduction, the editors find the theoretical stem to be "the least healthy" and argue that "until very recently, it would have been an exaggeration even to talk about a theoretical subdiscipline" (Anderson, Brockmann, & Miller, 1983, p. 7,9). In their diagnosis for this state of affairs, they cite "an environment [in the pedagogical and professional subdisciplines] inhospitable to the speculation and skepticism that scholarly research requires" (p. 9). As one goal of this essay is to assess the current state of theory in our profession, these earlier opinions are worth revisit-

ing. It would, I think, be difficult to find many in our field who would disagree with the editors then and equally difficult to find many who would agree with them now.

Partly because of this 1983 collection, which became a kind of intellectual line in the dust for scholars, the situation has changed dramatically, particularly for the theoretical stem. As the field has gained a more respectable academic foothold (see Killingsworth, this collection), it has attracted more technical communicators into theory work and the results are impressive by any variety of measures: the number of articles devoted to theory not only in technical communication journals but in "mainstream" journals such as *Rhetoric Review*, *College English*, *Written Communication*, and *College Composition and Communication* as well as the professional journals such as *IEEE Transactions in Professional Communication* and *Technical Communication*; the number of theory-rich collections such as Selzer's (1993) *Understanding Scientific Prose*, Killingsworth and Gilbertson's (1992) *Signs, Genres, & Communities*, and Bazerman and Paradis's (1991) *Textual Dynamics of the Professions*; the number of sessions on theory held at the Modern Language Association, College Conference on Composition and Communication, and even the professional meetings of International Professional Communication Conference and the Society for Technical Communication Annual Conference. In the annual bibliography published each fall by *Technical Communication Quarterly* (whose recent change of name from *The Technical Writing Teacher* adds another kind of proof of the general intellectualizing of the field), there are currently enough theory entries to require separate sections, entitled "Theory and Philosophy" and "Rhetoric of Science." Even technical communication textbooks, those easy targets of scholars, have begun to respond to this theory work by revising many of their bedrock lessons about the nature and practice of technical communication.

Such an impressive sampling can testify only indirectly, however, to the nature and quality of the theory work produced by and about technical communication. Because it would be o'er-reaching of me to attempt any comprehensive evaluation of this work in the last 11 years, I will focus on only three areas of study that seem to me most central to technical communication—audience, the writing process, and style. I will describe what I see as the prevailing theoretical positions, characterize the challenges to these positions, and suggest what's at stake for the field of technical communication.

#### AUDIENCE

Of all the topics to be discussed, audience has probably received the most theoretical attention, even in the early period of the 1940s and 1950s,

when most of the attention was on pedagogy and practice. For most scholars entering technical communication from a language-based background, especially English and especially as it was traditionally taught, questions about the intended readers of a document and their influence on the shaping of that document were new and exciting considerations. Schooled in the constraints of New Critical theory, where concern for readers was considered a fallacious move, scholars who taught technical communication were freed to analyze, teach, and theorize about texts in a whole new way—from seeing them as hermetically sealed works isolated from readers' everyday lives to dynamic documents that act directly on those lives.

Audience analysis was developed in the pioneer textbooks (Mathes and Stevenson, 1976; Pearsall, 1969; Souther and White, 1977) and, with little change, is carried as a staple chapter in most contemporary textbooks. Typically, the content on audience is taught as a two-part process: (1) discover as much as possible about the intended readers of a document, including their educational level, working habits, informational needs, and professional responsibilities; (2) determine as precisely as possible how the document would be used by those readers and under what conditions, for instance, as a repair manual on an oil rig, a reference chart in a laboratory, or a research article archived in the library. The assumption is that, armed with all this information, technical writers can produce a document that meets the audience's needs and thereby can accomplish their own purposes with a high degree of predictability. Underlying this interest in the reader is a belief in the author's ability to control meaning by creating a stable text whose content will be understood with as little ambiguity as possible.

This belief, as well as the value of audience analysis, has been challenged by reader response theorists on several theoretical fronts. Some rhetoricians argue that analysis alone is not a sufficient guide for writers, that in addition a mock, or pretend, reader needs to be imbedded in the text as a rhetorical companion to the persona put forth by the author. It is the quality of communication, or "fit," between these two figures that determines the success of a document (Booth, 1961; Burke, 1969; Coney, 1987; Gibson, 1950). If the writer has created an appealing enough mock reader, the actual intended readers will take on the role during the reading process, absorb the information, and return to their individual selves, enlightened and ready to make use of the information. Others argue that even that rhetorical model is too simplistic. Walter Ong (1975) denies any relation between the mock reader and actual readers who choose to pick up a text. For him, the audience for a text is always a fiction, created by the author but drawn from a long tradition of audiences for earlier, similar texts. And while Ong uses literary sources to demonstrate his thesis, he holds that it applies "ceteris paribus" to all texts, including scientific and

process was conducted by Linda Flower and John Hayes, a rhetorical scholar and a psychologist, technical communicators had already developed their own theoretical model, which drew on two very different sources: the engineering design process, with its emphasis on linear stages, and the rhetorical tradition, with its emphasis on purpose and audience as primary considerations (Souther & White, 1977; Perrin, 1950).

The model-based approach, which preceded process, has proven unsatisfactory on several fronts (Winkler, 1983). Despite its appeal to students and new employees who want examples to follow, there are no perfect models that can be taught in preparation for writing in the workplace: Formats change from company to company and different disciplines require different kinds of documentation. Although word processing programs provide a variety of structural models, they rarely match the demands of a particular situation. And, as Victoria Winkler points out, "Although the structural models for teaching writing suggest the *kinds* of information writers need for a particular discourse type, they do not provide writers with the means of generating that information" (p. 115). With the growing use of electronic mail for information exchange in the workplace, the formalities of traditional forms of documentation are giving way to a more informal discourse, more akin to speech than formal writing.

Certainly, another reason for the dominance of writing as process is the flurry of empirical research spawned by Flower and Hayes. Cognitive psychologists are continuing to bring their experimental methodologies to bear on the writing habits of beginning and expert writers to establish a more scientific basis on which to develop course materials, teaching strategies, and measurements and standards for mastery (Butterfield, 1994; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1983). This writing-as-cognition approach has obvious value for an academic field such as ours that intersects with science and engineering: It brings the writing class closer to the laboratory in both its terminology and its procedures.

But this very "scientizing" of writing, with its focus on subjects who, one by one, perform writing tasks in isolated, experimental settings, makes it vulnerable to attack from social constructionists. Kenneth Bruffee (1981) argues that "writing is not an inherently private act but is a displaced social act we perform in private for the sake of convenience" (p. 745). Marilyn Cooper (1989), in "The Ecology of Writing," takes the argument even further:

Increasingly, writing researchers have found that "elegant" [experimental] methods of studying writing are reductive, producing results that have no bearing on what writers—either beginning or expert—do. The common view of the natural science paradigm of research—the bracketing of variables so that a single one can be studied in isolation—is fundamentally inapplicable in the human sciences. No variables in human behavior are isolable." (p. viii)

For Cooper, "writing is not fundamentally a cognitive process, though of course thinking is involved. Writing is a way of interacting with others." Thus, to understand writing "we must first and primarily understand its place in the social process" (p. x).

Admittedly, this argument makes for a much messier, less controlled approach to studying writing. Yet it is not without its own methodologies that can yield insights not possible within the experimental framework. The ecological model that Cooper and Holzman (1989) develop in their book *Writing as Social Action* postulates a series of dynamic interlocking systems that writers affect and are affected by: systems of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms. Together, these form a web in which one act affects the whole. Not surprisingly, this model leads Cooper and Holzman into issues such as literacy education, gender, community, and bureaucratic structures that can promote or deny human development and expression.

Given the constant changes in the workplace environment for technical writers, the increasingly electronic forms of technical documentation, and the political and economic consequences of technological change, technical communicators need to consider theories that provide an inclusive research program, one that incorporates both the quantitative and the qualitative data about writers as they work individually to produce text, *and* as they are affected by and affect these external forces (Brandt, 1992). The point here is that scholars in technical communication can hardly afford to join sides. While each scholar might choose to do theory work in the social, rhetorical, or cognitive tradition, they should at least be cognizant of the complex nature of writing and of the range of theories dedicated to understanding it.

## STYLE

To find the major influence on the prevailing model of style in scientific and technical communication, one needs to go back to the 16th and 17th centuries when modern science was first beginning to define its philosophical position (Whitburn with Davis, Higgins, Oates, & Spurgeon, 1978). Calling for a language that adequately served their demands for observation and description, reformers such as Francis Bacon, John Wilkins, and John Webster decried the stylistic excesses of the period, best exemplified by John Lyly's *Euphues: An Anatomy of Wit*. Ignoring the fact that Lyly's exaggerated rhetorical flourishes were themselves a parody of contemporary courtly prose, these writers called for a style "plain and natural, not being darkened with . . . Rhetoricall flourishes. [Just as] Obscurity in the discourse is an argument of ignorance in the mind, The

greatest learning is to be seen in the greatest plainness . . ." (quoted in Jones, 1951, p. 78).

What is remarkable, despite the changes science itself has undergone in the last three centuries, is that this early position on style has remained largely unchanged. Except for the modernized spelling, almost identical arguments appear in the majority of current texts in our field: "Literary tricks, metaphors and the like, divert attention from the substance to the style. They should be used rarely, if at all, in scientific writing" (Day, 1988, p. 3); the best technical style is no style at all (Markel, 1992). Whitburn et al. (1978), who has traced the history of the plain language movement, finds that the "stylistic ideal of plainness ought not to continue as unchallenged as in the past. Revolutions are typically reactions against excesses, and the reactions are often as excessive as the original abuses" (p. 52). Changes in the knowledge and practice of science and technology and what he calls the "writing crisis we now confront" should lead us to reconsider the value of plain language as an adequate pedagogical or professional model. For one thing, it tends to focus too heavily on the finding and correcting of mechanical error, and, for another, it limits unduly the range of linguistic and rhetorical expression available to communicate ideas effectively for modern audiences. For students, writing too often becomes a defensive maneuver to avoid mistakes rather than a creative way to engage with others.

In a 1979 landmark essay that introduced many already teaching in technical communication to the ideas and consequences of post-modern theory, Carolyn Miller expanded Whitburn's position by attacking the philosophical tradition informing the plain language ideal—positivism, the belief in the existence of a reality separate from human perception and emotion. Calling it the "windowpane theory of language," she summarized the positivist supposition about language that has prevailed in technical communication, as well as in the sciences and engineering:

[It] 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. (p. 611-12)

Miller then cites philosophers who represent the "new epistemology," such as Kuhn, Ziman, and Bronowski, who argue against the objective/subjective dichotomy and the privileging of science as having special claims to truth. Instead, she concludes, "Science is, through and through, a rhetorical endeavor" (p. 616).

In a spirited critique of contemporary prose style, Richard Lanham (1974) puts forth many of the same arguments. His analysis of the CBS theory of writing recalls Miller's windowpane view of language:

We may call this conception, building on its three central values of clarity, brevity, and sincerity, the "C-B-S" theory [which] . . . argues that prose ought to be maximally transparent and minimally self-conscious, never seen and never noticed . . . "Rhetoric" in such a view very naturally becomes a dirty word, pointing to superficial ornament on the one hand and duplicity on the other. It becomes, that is, everything which interferes with the natural and efficient communication of ideas. "Rhetoric" is what we should get rid of in prose, not what we should analyze. (Lanham, 1983, p. 2)

And in one of the few books on style per se, Lanham extends the logic of his argument to the teaching of composition. Because the textbooks hold up as ideal a prose style that has essentially one goal, to disappear, they have literally "argued their subject out of existence. They do not teach style, they abolish it." And to fill the vacuum created by the nontopic of style, the "Books" indulge in "the American fetish for correctness, the agony over those droll Victorian antimacassars 'usage' and 'abusage'" (1974, p. 17).

A well-known answer to Lanham's indictment is Joseph Williams's book *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (1994). It not only deals with such substantive stylistic issues as cohesion and emphasis but also applies linguistic and cognitive scholarship to his lessons. For example, while he does affirm the ideal of clarity, he defends it on the strength of the psychological findings that readers can most easily take in and remember information if characters and actions are matched with the subject and verbs of sentences. Yet even here, the emphasis is on correction rather than invention, on economy rather than situation: The exercises consist mainly of revising appalling examples of prose rather than encouraging students to find a stylistic solution for a particular rhetorical effect. Williams's treatment of the topic is much more sophisticated than it is in most textbooks, but the lessons are still more coercive than creative. They do not adequately respond to Lanham's position that "successful prose styles vary as widely as the earth." Lanham continues,

People seldom write simply to be clear. They have designs on their fellow men. Pure prose is as rare as pure virtue, and for the same reasons. The classical discussions of style concern themselves less with clarity than with more common human purposes, with advantage and pleasure. (1974, p. 17)

Are these purposes, these arguments, germane to technical communication? Are "advantage and pleasure" appropriate goals to teach technical communication students? I think so, if "purpose and satisfaction" are understood in the sense of fulfilling needs, both writers' and readers'.

The paradox I find so puzzling in the upholding of the plain language model by so many technical communication textbooks is that most schol-

ars in the field—who are, after all, also the writers of textbooks and teachers—have largely rejected the philosophy on which the plain language model is based: positivism. Influenced by such philosophers as Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish and technical communication theorists such as Miller and Whitburn, scholars have embraced the social constructionist view of knowledge. A belief in facts objectively obtained and authority of texts has yielded to a belief in communal assent and power of readers to determine meaning (Dombrowski, 1995; also see the Ornatowski and Subbiah chapters in this section). Yet a concomitant theory of style to achieve assent and empower readers has yet to be written for technical communication.

A promising beginning is the recently published *Technical Communication* (Lay et al., 1995). Described by its authors as a “third-generation” textbook, “it focuses on the social construction of knowledge that situates communicative acts in a meaningful context” (*Instructor’s Resource Guide*, 1). Their credo is spelled out forcefully (dare I say *clearly*?) in the preface:

We don’t believe that either communication or technology is an isolated phenomenon; instead, we believe that they occur in a rich setting that is shaped by economics, ethics, legal considerations, and social and cultural forces. Therefore, the examples, assignments, and exercises we offer here assume that the technology is created and used by people with various values, interests, and needs—and that technical communicators can and should help audiences understand and use technology, make decisions about technology, and solve problems with technology. (Lay et al., p. ix)

Their chapter on style reflects these beliefs in that it teaches that a variety of styles are available for the technical writer and that appropriateness is determined more by the immediate situation than by an abstract standard of correctness. However, their exercises fall short of their promise in that they, like Williams, focus more on revision of a garbled piece of prose than on the production of an effective message. For example, they call for editing of an appraisal performance, which “must be clearly written,” and exhort students to “revise [by] reducing it significantly and organizing it logically” (p. 303). How much more consistent would it have been if the exercise had set up a particular rhetorical situation and asked students to write an appraisal in a style suiting that situation. Think of the learning—not to mention pleasure—that could have come from peer readings!

A text that *does* practice a much more supple, situational, even playful approach to style is not really a text at all (in the sense of textbook), nor was it originally written in English (perhaps the most telling point of all). It is *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau (1981), translated from French by Barbara Wright. Absent of theory, this delightful little book takes an

unexceptional event—equivalent to what Queneau calls a “rather slight theme” from a Bach fugue—and expresses it in 99 stylistic variations. The facts are minimal: A long-necked young man gets on a crowded bus and eventually finds a seat. Later he is observed at a bus station with a friend who comments on his outfit. Yet by the time readers get through even half of the hilarious versions, the book demonstrates two serious points: (1) that there are almost an endless variety of styles available to express even the most factual set of circumstances, and (2) that each new stylistic version calls into question the “factuality” of previous tellings. In short, Queneau produces by his “exercises in style,” first published in 1947, a post-modern demonstration of the instability of text and the power of language to create reality. If technical communication is to have a theory of style consistent with current theories about the nature of text, language, and reality, then surely this little French “trifle” would seem to point the way better than even the most recent treatments of style in well-received technical communication textbooks. A theory of style that allows for a full range of rhetorical choices would not only serve students and professional practice; it would also confirm the experiences of research scientists. In a study of the role metaphor plays in conceptualization and abstraction, Liliane Papin (1990) cites famous instances of metaphorical leaps into new insights, such as Archimedes’ displaced bathwater allowing him to figure out how to calculate the volume of irregular shapes. Less known is evidence that “the failure to explore certain metaphors has slowed down the development of science.” Papin cites the studies of historians Bohm and Peat, who speculate that the edge is given to those who exhibit “an extremely perceptive state of intense passion and high energy” that allows scientists to see beyond appearances (p. 1259). Bohm and Peat hypothesize that through metaphorical play, incommensurables can coexist and the disorder created by the “either-or model of conventional science” can be lessened (p. 1261).

In the same spirit of conciliation, I would conclude that any fully articulated theory of style for scientific and technical prose needs to accommodate the richness and complexity of thought expressed by that prose. No one style, plain or any other, is sufficient for the demands of technical communication.

## OBSERVATIONS

A few observations rather than conclusions seem appropriate, except for the obvious conclusion that theory work, once begun, is never settled, never complete. And it should not be expected to be. The controversies that this essay has attempted to chart speak to the health of theory in tech-

nical communication; they attest to the "speculation and skepticism" that Anderson et al. found lacking a decade ago. The controversies also speak to the state of the field itself, which some theorists argue is marked more by fragmentation than agreement. Accordingly, they urge technical communicators "to entertain a 'rhetoric of dissensus' as part of our understanding of how human knowledge gets constructed and deconstructed" (Van Pelt, 1994).

Theory, in other words, reflects and deepens—rather than explains away—the complexities inherent in any field of study, no less so in technical communication, which must take into account the immediacies of the workplace, the classroom, the laboratory, as well as the work of scholars, both in and out of the field. The process of doing theory requires tolerance as well as curiosity, introspection as well as exploration. This aspect of theory work is best described by Eagleton (1990) in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*: "Theory is just a kind of catching ourselves in the act of being subjects, a deeper appropriation of what we already are" (p. 129). And like all subjects we are always in flux, never fixed.

Another observation is that there is a tendency to borrow theories from other fields and graft them onto technical communication. While one might argue that some theories "take" less well than others (and each theorist has a favorite candidate), this trend is good for a number of reasons, and there's no reason for (or sign of) change. This borrowing keeps technical communication in tune with the larger world of scholarly research and keeps fresh ideas flowing into the field; it provides insights not always evident from a practical point of view and suggests methodologies by which these insights can be tested; and most important, it is in keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of technical communication. It is through the work technical communicators do, both tangible and theoretical, that they come to learn more about themselves as well as about others.

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## EMPLOTTING THE READER: MOTIVATION AND TECHNICAL DOCUMENTATION

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### ABSTRACT

Technical documents implicitly require readers to play out textually constructed roles in order to create meanings. Good technical writers create texts that motivate their readers by emplotting them in an attractive fabula, and, especially, in a role that not only achieves the ostensible purposes of the documentation but also allows the reader to function as the hero in a narrative of progress and improvement. Drawing on reader-response criticism and narratology, this article shows how a particular instructional software manual, the *VP-Expert*™ guide, instructs and motivates readers by using devices which resemble the conventions of heroic narrative.

Killingsworth, Gilbertson, and Chew have argued recently that "just as rhetoric in all its types aims to 'move' the reader, all technical writing is action-oriented" [1, p. 16]. Applied to instructional, tutorial-based software manuals, this statement proves to be true in two senses. Explicitly, an instructional manual attempts to move the reader, step by step, through a sequence of actions to a desired outcome. Word-processing software manuals, for instance, lead the reader through the creation, storage, printing, and design of documents; spreadsheet software manuals, through the steps leading to the production of visually displayed columns, tables, charts, and so on. Implicitly, however, a manual must accomplish a great deal more. It must encourage the reader to face the daunting spectre of neologisms, foreign terms, and abstract, technical concepts, and to continue to read the text in spite of these obstacles. To accomplish this goal, a manual must *emplot* the reader, that is, must *create an action-oriented role within a storyline that transforms the reader* from a hesitant, if not reluctant neophyte, into a