



A Commentary on *Becoming a Technical Writer*

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Abstract

This paper reviews Tao Youlan et al.'s (2020) *Becoming a Technical Writer*. It examines the endogenous dynamics involved in the development of technical writing. Through a comprehensive analysis of the technical writing process, it highlights the importance of cultivating technical thinking competencies—such as user-centered thinking, standardized and controlled language, technical understanding, and effective communication and collaboration—in the context of teaching Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) programs and the language service industry. The book is both systematic and practical, illustrating the history and future prospects of technical writing. It enriches the teaching framework of the MTI courses and fosters the development of well-rounded professionals who can translate, comprehend technology, and possess a strong sense of language service. The thinking behind the writing of this book also reflects the latest concepts of technical writing and communication at home and abroad, which can enrich the course materials of technical writing classes for MTI majors and provide teachers with better choices of teaching materials.

Keywords

Technical writing; technological thinking competence; MTI; user-centered

1. Introduction

Technical writing, the core method of technology communication, is closely related to economic development and market maturity which serves as a powerful driving force that promotes enterprises for international business. There is an increasing demand for technical documents and higher requirements for local enterprises because of their rapid development and the trend of exporting products and services overseas. Currently, enterprises are more concerned with the relationship between products and people due to social progress and the improvement of people's product and service experience. This provides the endogenous impetus for the development of technical writing. In the era of new media, the medium has changed dramatically and the means of technical information communication have also changed from graphic to rich media. In addition, the connotation and extension of technical writing have been greatly expanded through the comprehensive provision of video, animation, sound, and hyperlinks. We now can spread it as a set of skills with a learning value for everyone in the golden age of technology communication (Miles A. Kimball, 2017). Besides, the development of technical writing is closely related to the development of relative academic disciplines and the improvement of the education system. It is shown from a survey of the Chinese enterprise language service market that technical writing has become the third major demand in addition to interpretation and translation needs. However, there are no degree-conferred courses related to technical communication in China and only some universities have offered technical communication/writing courses (non-degree courses). There is also a relative lack of mapping practical and purposeful teaching materials.

2. Overview

Becoming a Technical Writer systematically discusses the current status of domestic and international development of technical writing and communication and the ability and literacy of technical writing engineers. It gradually

elaborates on the four major steps of technical writing. The book is divided into two parts, consisting of five chapters. Each chapter begins with an introduction, followed by an elaboration on the teaching objectives, an explanation of the core topics, summaries, and exercises. The editor outlined the overall context of technical writing in the “Introduction” section, including the definition, features, history, and future development of technical writing, as well as the necessary skill sets and professional resources for technical writers. From Chapter 2 to Chapter 5, the editor elaborated on the four major technical writing steps from the writing process: plan, develop, revise, and publish.

2.1 Technical writing—A writing mode that guides users to complete specific operations

Technical writing is a process of planning, developing, revising, and delivering technical information to users (Tao Youlan et al., 2020). It covers relevant, useful, and accurate information for specific users, helping them accomplish specific tasks (Manual of Technical Communication Introduction, 2018). Readers can independently complete a specific task or make reasonable decisions with the information in technical texts (Wang Chuanying & Wang Dan, 2018). Writing can be completed through professional knowledge in a specific technical field (Gould, Losano, 2008). Technical writing is different from other types of writing in terms of writing theme, thinking features, purpose, and written products. It aims to help target users complete tasks, solve problems, and achieve ultimate goals. This book summarizes the differences between technical writing and other types of writing from the following six points:

- (1) Technical writing emphasizes user needs and focuses on target users for writing. The purpose for readers to read technical documents is different from that of other types of documents. Users only read technical documents to solve problems. In the third chapter “Development”, the editor also clarified the quality standards for technical writing documents, namely, accuracy, completeness, clarity, conciseness, and consistency. These normative requirements are all aimed at enhancing the readability and comprehensibility of technical documents, serving the reading needs of the target users.
- (2) Technical writing is constrained by writing style, genre conventions, and international standards. Hence, the information in technical documents should be accurate and must be safe to use.
- (3) Unique writing methods and professional writing software are required in technical writing. For example, in the “Development” step of the third chapter, the editor offered a detailed explanation and provided examples to illustrate how to use DITA for structured writing. Writing with tools is the only way to master them and an effective way to cultivate students’ technological understanding. The editor also introduced the tools for structured writing in this chapter, namely the architectural approach for creating, producing, and publishing information with Oxygen as a tool.
- (4) Technical writing is a well-defined professional and career path that is not limited to any specific industry while requiring collective collaboration.
- (5) The writing and delivery of technical document writers are extremely diverse. These deliverables can be seen everywhere in daily life, such as color pages of product introduction and feature display videos, product user manuals, software usage guidelines, software embedded online help, enterprise technical support website and help, tips, and training information, etc. The presentation of technical information is equally important as the technical information itself.
- (6) Technical writing is not only a profession engaged by technical personnel, but also one of the academic research fields and one of the specialized courses offered by many universities both domestically and internationally.

2.2 User-centered—Cultivate technological thinking competency in writing

Firstly, with regard to the thinking characteristics of writing, technical writing belongs to “sequential thinking” that is different from the “associative thinking” followed by traditional humanities and social sciences. It is intended to convey a clear conclusion or method on specific information. Its writing thinking or structure system is relatively fixed and standardized. It is advisable to first analyze the background of technical document writing, followed by clarifying the practical problems in writing (such as cost, time, difficulty, risk, etc.), solutions and ideas, how to analyze and solve them in the practical writing and whether it can precipitate a more general methodology. Finally, it is recommended to summarize the experience and plan for the future. This book divides the technical writing process into planning, development, modification, and release through this approach, which are the contents from Chapter 2 to 5. They are intertwined and indispensable. The “Planning” step described in Chapter 2 is a preparatory stage and an extremely important step before technical writing. It includes the analysis of both users and document

backgrounds, research on products, content organization, and document delivery forms determination. The user-oriented thinking emphasized in technical writing thinking advocates a user-centered approach, a way of thinking guided by user needs. The fundamental purpose of technical documentation is to help readers understand how to choose the right human resources at the right time (When) and place (Where), and do the right thing (What) through the right methods (How). Therefore, technical writers need to first analyze the attributes and characteristics of technical content users, analyze their reading habits, and truly implement language services for users.

2.3 The integration of language writing, technical understanding, and communication and collaboration abilities

A technical writer should conduct technical writing. It does not mean that they only need to be proficient in writing skills. It is also mentioned in the book that technical writers should be all-rounders with the following skill sets: (1) Writing and communication skills. In addition to language and writing abilities, technical writers also need to follow technical writing quality standards when creating technical documents, namely accuracy, completeness, clarity, conciseness, and consistency, to develop high-quality technical information. This quality ultimately aims to make the technical documents easy to use, understand, and find, helping readers effectively solve problems. Communication and collaboration are even more indispensable since the work of technical writers is usually project-oriented. Instead, they participate in larger teamwork and implement the writing process in workflow, job responsibilities, and performance evaluation. The implementation of a qualified and high-quality technical document not only relies on writing skills, but also involves the linkage, cooperation, and communication between various technical departments. These are all tasks that technical writers need to complete. This feature has also led to the modularization and structuring of technical documents, making it easier for the division of labor and collaborative work. (2) It is necessary to be proficient in structured writing standards and document content management. (3) Visual and information technology design skills are required. It is mentioned in the book *Visual and information design* that technical writers must also possess some basic skills in visual and information design although they are not professional graphic designers since static and interactive visual effects are increasingly applied in current technical documents. It is still the norm working with a technical compositor even if you don't need to create visual effects yourself. Visual effects design is realized by the collaboration between technical document engineers, composition engineers, subject matter experts, and engineers in technical writing. Therefore, what do the specific visual and information design skills refer to here? The editor also provided a detailed introduction of this in the third chapter: Initially, understand the principles of document design. Secondly, learn to use major software programs such as Adobe Indesign, Photoshop, and Movie Maker. Finally, learn how to integrate into practice and determine the best solution for visual and information design. 4. User experience. Digital and intelligent products become increasingly complex and interactive. Thus, the output of technical document engineers is no longer a standalone document since the document is already embedded in the product interface itself. Product usability is inherently influenced by the availability of technical documents and technical document engineers need to conduct user research and usability testing to validate their designs and further improve the user experience. Consequently, technical document engineers subsequently became user experience designers and researchers. In the fourth chapter, the editor also provides readers with a comprehensive and detailed explanation of usability testing methods.

3. The characteristics and inspiration of this book

Becoming a Technical Writer is a book with a comprehensive perspective and it emphasizes both theory and practice. It is one of the latest works in China that provides a detailed introduction to the key knowledge points in technical writing. This book provides guidance for technical writing teaching in the following aspects:

- (1) This is the first technical writing textbook in English by Chinese people for translation majors in China. The material selection is based on the English writing characteristics of Chinese students and meets the requirements of the Chinese market for technical document engineers. Concisely and practically designed, the book is highly targeted. The introduction guides readers to have a macro understanding of the overview of domestic and international technical writing and communication. Then it provides readers with a detailed understanding of the four steps of the technical writing process from a micro perspective. Technical writing involves normative content such as quality standards, style guidelines, and writing tools. Thereafter, the book provides a large number of tables and illustrations for learners to refer to. Rich in exercises, diverse in form, and highly

operational, it is specifically designed for specific teaching objectives. Each chapter starts with an introduction and teaching objectives and ends with targeted supplementary exercises. It echoes the beginning and end, which is a major feature of a textbook. The major content and cases in the book have been practiced in MTI classrooms or training. The background of the book is relatively mature.

- (2) The interdisciplinary nature of technical writing promotes the cultivation of comprehensive talents with both arts and sciences. The technical document production in China has become complex, requiring translation between Chinese and other languages due to the different technical backgrounds and language abilities of document writers. Technical document materials such as product manuals by multinational corporations are translated from English into Chinese while products made in China are translated from Chinese to English by engineers and technicians. It can be seen that technical writers undertake both technical document creation and translation. They need to translate professional technical information for the target users and the translation should meet their expectations and levels. Thus, technical writers are both writers and translators from this perspective. They need to consider the real needs of later multilingual translation and the “appropriateness” of the translated text in different target language societies, such as language, culture, and law when creating technical documents. Then they fully utilize standardized and controlled language and expression, making the text easy to translate into other languages without the need for deep processing. The diversified writing ability is in the advanced stage of translation ability - the professional expertise stage. It is the direction of translators’ abilities cultivation, as well as one of the goals of many universities in China that offer MTI courses. Language services are undergoing a new positioning with the rapid development of information technology and communication technology (Zhao Junfeng, 2017). The cultivation of comprehensive talents with abilities of translation and technology, and language service awareness is in line with the training goal of MTI. Technical writing through the use of technical writing software and technical writing thinking is the job of technical writers and is also a reflection of their comprehensive ability to integrate technology and language. This book is a valuable reference in cultivating comprehensive talents.

4. Suggestions

There are also some shortcomings in the book *Becoming a Technical Writer* for its multiple authors. Firstly, the contents are excessively refined in the arrangement. The second and third-level titles of each chapter are not displayed in the table of contents, which is inconvenient for readers to search and consult. Secondly, technical writing teaching involves a large number of teaching cases. It is advisable to optimize the types, quantity, and dynamic updates of cases, for example, establishing an electronic database of textbook-matched teaching cases.

It was a slight flaw in a white jade, but flaws do not hide the essence. In summary, the writing thinking of the book *Becoming a Technical Writer* reflects the latest concepts in technical writing and domestic and international communication. It can be used as a textbook for technical writing courses for MTI majors and the entry-level learning materials for technical writing researchers.

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