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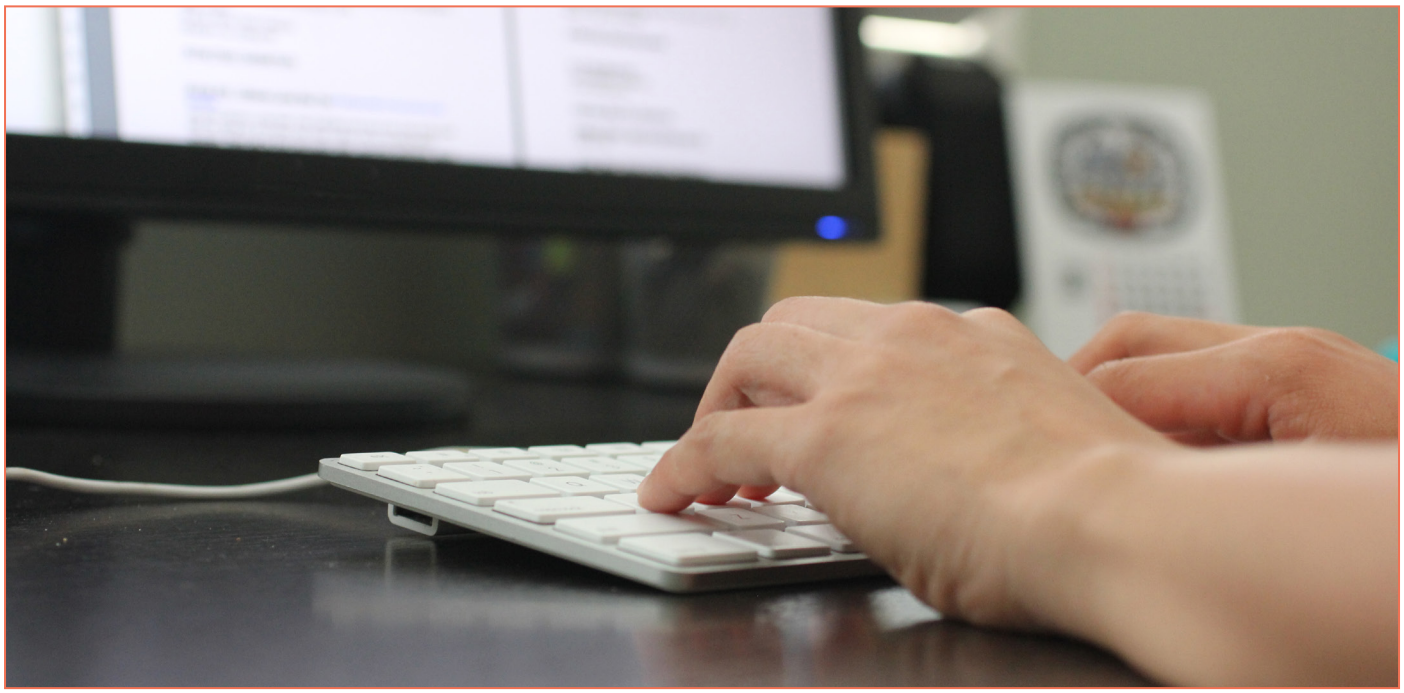
LESSON 1 SCOPE AND NATURE OF TECHNICAL WRITING

Technical writing is different to other forms of writing. Other writing may be primarily designed to tell a story or, in a broad sense, to entertain, inform, educate or communicate; technical writing is more about documenting information as a reference i.e. information that is designed to instruct, explain or direct in a clear and concise manner. The purpose of technical writing can be as diverse as preparing a document that can be used by the owners of a new machine or device, a journal article or thesis that records the results of a piece of academic research or to simplify more complex information.



What Is Involved?

You may think technical writing has to be about technical or scientific subjects, but that isn't necessarily so. Technical writing includes the writing of:

- **Manuals** - instruction manuals, procedures manuals, process manuals, user manuals, policy manuals.
- **Reports** - data and analysis reports; scientific reports; summarisations of larger reports that highlight and summarise key points and elements.
- **Leaflets and brochures** - simple instructions e.g. how to assemble something; OH&S (operational health and safety) instructions, how to use a product; how to operate a machine etc.

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Suggested Tasks

Think about the term 'technical writing'. Try to define it for yourself. Write down your definition.

Now, search online for "technical writing definition".

Read several definitions. How do they compare to your own definition? Was your definition as accurate as you thought?

Other technical writing may be found in any of the following:

- Articles (e.g. magazine)
- Blogs
- Books
- Catalogues
- Conference presentations
- Contracts
- Course notes & study guides
- Course curriculum documentation
- Customer service text
- Demonstrations
- Educational handouts
- Frequently asked questions (FAQs)
- Journals
- Marketing material
- News bulletins
- Newspapers
- Newsletters
- Press releases
- Product packaging
- Product labels
- Product reviews
- Product user guidelines
- Production processes
- Progress reports
- Procedures (e.g. staff or quality manuals)
- Project reports
- Proposals
- Reference guides
- Research papers
- Sales material
- Scripts for film or radio
- Training material
- User manuals
- Warning labels
- Websites
- Work specifications

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Suggested Tasks

Think about what types of technical writing you are most exposed to.

Are they listed here? If not, it demonstrates just how broad the scope of technical writing is.

Examples of Technical Writing

Technical writing is widely used in training materials, guides, manuals, websites etc. Here are three examples of technical writing -

Example 1: CALCULATING A T-TEST IN EXCEL

The prime purpose for using a t-test is to determine whether the means of two groups show a statistically significant difference. The t-test may be applied to groups with independent members or to groups with dependent (matched) members such as pre and post events.

To calculate this in Excel you will need to install the Data Analysis Tool:

Go to Tools, select Add-ins and click on the box next to Analysis Tool Pak. Click Ok. Your Data Analysis Tool Pak is installed.

To use the tool, go to Tools and select Data Analysis. A box will appear, you will need to select t-test Two Sample Assuming Equal Variances – this is an unpaired t-test. Enter the data ranges and set the Hypothesised Mean Difference to 0. Click on labels. Alpha is automatically set to 0.05. New Worksheet will be also set by default, change this to: Output Range and set the output for $Axx (xx the cell which is suitable for your datasheet). Click OK and your spreadsheet should appear.

The results will differ slightly from those calculated by hand due to rounding.

Example 2: GUIDELINES FOR SAFETY WITH ELECTRICITY

- Remember electricity can kill!
- Don't let wires become exposed through insulated coverings
- Don't allow any parts of cables, plugs or electric machines to become loose
- Don't overload a circuit by putting too many double adaptors on the one socket
- Never use electric tools in wet conditions
- Never use electric tools when a lightning storm is threatening
- Don't pull the plug out by the cord – this can weaken the connections
- Don't let water (or wet hands) get near any electrical cord
- Don't switch a power tool on when it is partly dismantled
- Always switch the power off before disconnecting a power tool
- Don't work around live wires (e.g. connecting power to a building)
- Where appropriate, use an earth leakage safety plug.

Example 3: PROPERTIES OF LIGHT

For photographic purposes, light possesses several properties. The first is intensity, which will be discussed later. The second is colour, which in

photographic terms, is measured by colour temperature. This temperature scale is based upon the concept of a 'black body radiator'. In essence, this means that if we take, for example, a cold black iron bar and heat it, we will eventually reach the point where it begins to emit light. The temperature required to make this body emit light is measured in Kelvin degrees, the temperature scale which begins at absolute zero or minus 273 degrees Celsius.

Consequently, the light emitted by a tungsten light source (for example, studio flood lights), is said to have a colour temperature of 3,200 degrees or the equivalent in light spectrum emission to a black body radiator heated to this temperature. The higher the temperature, the bluer and less red the light emitted until eventually, at very high temperatures, the light moves towards the violet end of the visible spectrum. Normal daylight is measured to be 5,500K degrees.

BECOMING A TECHNICAL WRITER

To be a technical writer you must have a broad range of skills in order to secure employment or ongoing projects. To work successfully in this field you will need:

- Excellent communication skills – both written and verbal (you will be dealing with many and varied experts in their fields).
- Logic and precision – technical writing demands a precise approach. Your work must be backed with sound research. Your work should also be logical – research you have undertaken and the facts you have amassed should be presented in a logical form. For example, with an A-Z on how to assemble something you would start at 'a', not 'c'!
- Excellent word processing skills.
- To be able to manage projects: set up schedules, meet deadlines, be part of the review process.
- To work efficiently and independently.
- A solid, broad education.
- To constantly update your knowledge and skills.
- To network with your peers and industry.
- To build a portfolio of work to demonstrate your skills for future employment or work prospects.

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Suggested Tasks

Using the list of skills presented here, decide which ones you already have, and which ones you need to work on.

If you can give yourself an honest self-appraisal, you will be able to set yourself goals for self-improvement.