

Creativity in Technical Communication

How to combine creativity with technical communication standards ?

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Abstract

Is technical communication a creative job? Technical communication remains a domain that is often unknown or misunderstood. People tend to think that technical communicators only write procedures and follow guidelines. As technical communicators, we wanted to combine our experience and vision of our work to discuss the vast subject of creativity.

This matter came to us after several discussions about our respective jobs, and tasks. We realized that even though we study the same principles of technical communication, the work we do in our companies can be very different from one another. All of us are confronted to norms and standards that we need to follow, but does it really mean that we cannot be creative?

Keywords: technical communication, technical writing, creativity, standards

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We would also like to thank the technical communicators who answered our survey and helped us for this research paper. We believe your answers and comments were very helpful, not only for our research paper but for the technical communication domain in general.

Introduction

Technical communicators working for companies, especially big firms, often have to follow several norms, standards and guidelines provided by the company itself. Most companies have their own standards, and as technical communicators it is part of our job to make sure the documentation we write is in conformity with these standards.

As we were discussing about our experiences in the workplace and comparing our tasks, we discovered there is a multitude of aspects in the job of a technical communicator. That is why this article will focus on the use of creativity in technical communication, and more precisely on how to combine technical communication and creativity. As future graduate technical communicators, we decided to talk about creativity because we think it is a notion that is too often dissociated from our jobs.

The aim of our research is to demonstrate that creativity and technical communication are not incompatible. We observed, through our own experiences and what we could hear from technical communicators, that this job is often unknown, and that technical communicators can be seen as “second role” people. This role is most of the time underestimated, and we think that is one of the reasons why technical communicators are not portrayed as creative people. Therefore, we want to question that preconceived idea. It is important to us to always question preconceived ideas, especially concerning our domain of expertise. That is why we want to determine if it is possible for us technical communicators to express our creativity through our work, even when most of us are working in very technical fields: software industry, aerospace companies, robotics etc.

To be more accurate in our research, and not only base our article on our personal experience, we conducted a survey that we sent to several technical communicators (technical writers, UX designers, e-learning conceptors...). We wanted professionals to answer our questions about creativity and standards in technical communication. In fact, technical writers or communicators have to follow very specific rules most of the time. Our work needs to be efficient, clear and easy to read. That is why norms exist. But how do technical writers exist in these norms? What if the norms are not appropriate to the users we are writing for?

Before deep diving into our topic for discussion and the results of our survey, we will first introduce the notion of creativity, and then talk about standards.

About Creativity

Before debating whether technical communicators are creative or not, it is important to determine what “being creative” means. Everyone has an idea of the concept of creativity. Creativity is a vast notion that evolves with time. When people think of creativity, they often think about arts, literature, music, etc. However, if we take a look at the definition of creativity, it is “the ability to produce original and unusual ideas or to make something new and imaginative”¹. An interesting point that we can highlight in this definition is the notion of “making something new”, which reminds us of innovation. Therefore, we could believe that creativity is not only linked to imagination. What if innovation could play a part in creativity? This aspect of innovation is interesting because the three of us are working for companies that promote innovation in new technologies and software more specifically. We then figured that where there is innovation, there must be creativity. What if technical communicators could also be playing their part in this creativity?

“Creativity is a lot like looking at the world through a kaleidoscope. You look at a set of elements, the same ones everyone else sees, but then reassemble those floating bits and pieces into an enticing new possibility.”

– Rosabeth Kanter

While searching for information about creativity, we came across the notion of creative process. Have you ever done a brainstorming with your colleagues at work? Or imagined a new solution for your users? This is actually the first step of what we call the creative process. In fact, for a company to innovate or deliver a new product, they need to follow a few steps: here is an illustration of the universal creative process.

¹ Definition of **creativity** from the [Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary](#) © Cambridge University Press



Note: This is only one interpretation among a multitude of others.

Indeed, every project starts by identifying a goal, whether it is the goal for the team, the company, the users, etc. For example, as technical communicators we need to think about our users' need, but this need constantly evolves with time, doesn't it? Before providing your user with new documentation, an e-learning module, a guide or any product, you first need to identify their need: this is the first step of the creative process.

How would this process work for a technical communicator writing a guide for their users?

1. The user needs a guide to be able to bake a cake.
2. In order to provide this guide, I need a guide with procedures, images, ingredients, etc.
3. It needs to be clear, concise and use the right measurements depending on the user's nationality.
4. Meeting with the technical writing team to discuss ideas about the structure of the guide.
5. First version of the guide released.
6. The guide is about to be published online or on paper. The user needs to be convinced to use the guide.
7. Get feedback from your users, create a survey.

As we can see, creative process can be relayed into a various range of scenarios. It is then interesting to remember that creativity is way more than what we think of it at first, but we will see that later in our research.

About Graphic charters

A graphic charter is aimed at creating an identity for your company. It represents the values of the company. In a graphic charter you can find logos, colors, fonts, icons, etc. It is mostly the visual part of the brand that needs to be recognizable.

About Guidelines

A guideline gathers the writing rules that the technical communicator has to follow. The aim is to produce a documentation that is coherent and homogeneous. Indeed, each writer has his/her own writing style influenced by school, personality or cultural practices. To respect the neutral principal of technical writing, guidelines provide norms to follow for the layout, vocabulary and grammar.

Companies usually have their own style guide but you can also find public guidelines like the *Microsoft Manual of Style*, the *Oxford Manual of Style* or the *Handbook of Technical Writing*. Style guides may be seen as a drag on creativity, yet, they are essential. Writing is a creative activity. It is a cerebral process that turns abstract ideas into concrete text. Thus, there is as many possibilities as there are technical communicators. Guidelines help to harmonize all these possibilities.

Methods

For our research we decided to build a survey targeting technical communicators: technical writers, user experience developers/designers, e-learning conceptors etc. This survey was published via Google Forms on the social media LinkedIn, and sent by email to professionals. We decided to write the questions in english, because most of technical communicators work in english, even in France. The anonymity of people submitting their answers was guaranteed. First of all, we wanted to collect information from different branches of technical communication, to highlight the fact that it is a domain that is constantly evolving, and to gather different points of view. If we look at the different jobs of the interviewees, here is what comes out:

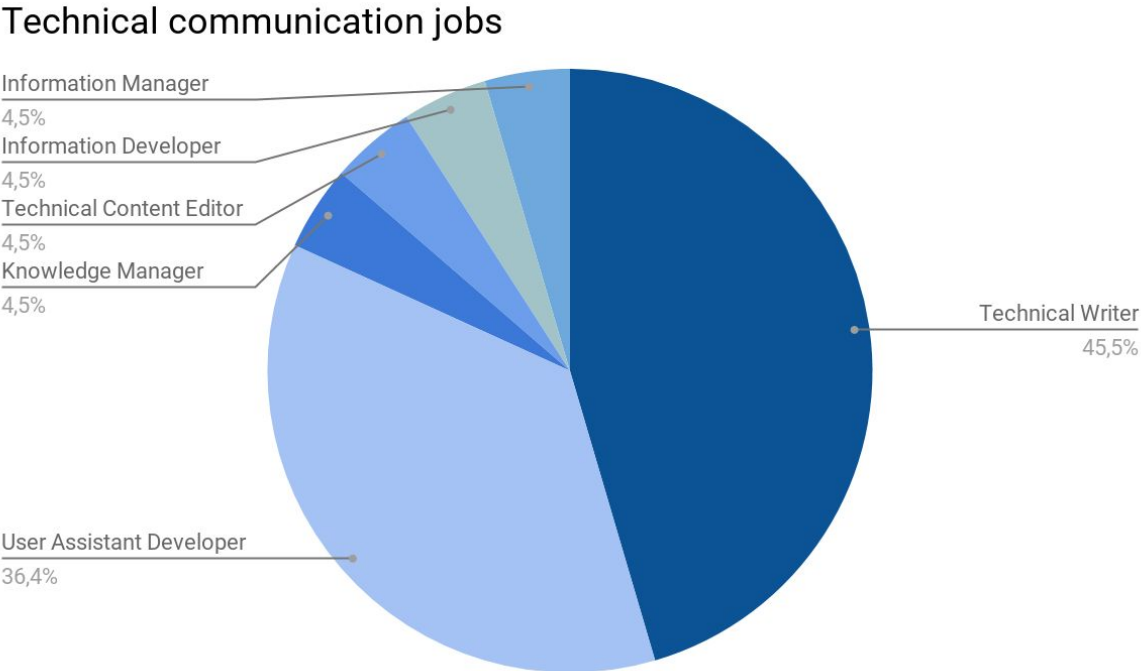


Figure 1 Survey on 25 respondents, July 2020.

Although the majority of people who answered the survey are technical writers, there is more and more new branches of the domain that emerge with time. We thought this first information would be helpful for our research because it would give us a different perspective from technical writing for instance and determine if there are some jobs in technical communication that could offer more creativity.

A second information we wanted to collect before deep diving into the main subject of the survey was the number of years working as technical communicators. The majority of people answering our survey (50%) said they have only been technical communicators for one to five years, 45 % were in between five and twenty-five years, and only 5 % more than twenty-five years. This indication was useful for our research because we thought we might notice different answers about creativity at work depending on the experience in technical communication.

Results

Technical communicators and creativity

The first section of our questionnaire was focusing on creativity. The results we got from our survey show that 85% of the technical communicators answering consider themselves to be creative (*5/10 and above on a scale from one to ten*). And about 70% of the interviewees say that they feel creative in their job.

As introduction to this paper we gave you a definition of creativity, however, we wanted to ask technical communicators what they think creativity is. The answers were very inspiring and very diverse. Let's take a look at some answers:

"In contrast to "professionalism" - which is the correct and rigorous application of known ways of solving a problem. "Creativity" involves finding unexpected but successful solutions: ways of resolving problems, whether in art, life, or documentation that other people - and even other professionals in the field - would not have been able to devise. As a result, creativity has both an analysis dimension (the problem) and a practical dimension (the solution). In other words, you only solve a problem once, and after that, you apply the solution when the same problem arises. Creativity is finding the solution - not applying the solution."

This answer is very interesting to us in the sense that the person answering the question seems to compare or even oppose creativity to "professionalism" (that we could also call "rationality" or "rigor" by the terms used here). It is interesting first because, said in that specific way we could think that someone creative could not be professional. But is it really the case?

Here is another answer that goes a different way:

"Creativity is considering other ways or format to do something. It can be applied to anything, any task. To me creativity is not always visible at the first glance, as it might be subtle. Thanks to creativity, you can express yourself with your personal way of thinking/seeing things. In a nutshell, without creativity, we're robots."

The comparison between humans and robots here is very inspiring. This person seems to be saying that anyone can be creative, and that creativity is even vital for people to work, to function. This would mean that technical communicators not only are creative but need creativity in their job at some point.

Most of the answers we received confirmed the idea that creativity is not only about imagination and creating things from your hands. Some of the definitions we received even showed how technical communicators could benefit from creativity.

“Creativity is finding solutions to every problem and finding new improved way of doing my job.”

“Finding new ways to clarify given information”

“Creativity is the ability to mix various forms of expression in order to convey a straightforward message in an unexpected manner”

Technical communicators and standards

According to the experiences of professional technical writers, editorial standards have a central place in technical communication: 87% of the professionals follow a style guide at work and 26% of them think that editorial standards are a benefit to their work. Yet, a small minority of them, around 4%, considers that those standards are a hindrance to their creativity. But what is interesting to look at is the opinion of the professionals on those editorial standards:

“I think editorial standards are an inseparable part of good technical writing. Having fundamental rules for structural and stylistic editing are key factors that ensure a homogeneous and concise documentation irrespective of brands, community, or the developers who wrote it. Apart from this, what I think is that editorial standards should be flexible and keep evolving when new and valid authoring use cases are proposed. I am proud that we have a dedicated team of professionals looking after the editorial standard and open to open to suggestions from all UA developers.”

“I think editorial standards are intended to provide consistency to our users. In general I look for other ways to express creativity, such as in making a video or an animation to explain a key point.”

Those two testimonies reflect the global feeling of the professionals that we have interviewed. Editorial standards are essential in our job but they should not be incompatible with expressing creativity.

This interview is in line with our research: according to Carl Rogers in his book *On Becoming a Person*, creativity exists in every individual. He calls it the “growth” and believes that it is vital for humans to express this creativity in order to achieve a healthy personal development.

Thus, based on the professional technical communicators’ experiences and on our research, we understand that editorial norms are essential in order to provide an homogeneous documentation but creativity is also important for the writer’s development and therefore, the documentation they produce. According to the professionals we have interviewed, creativity should not impact the consistency of the documentation and editorial norms should not block the possibility of being creative. This is the perfect balance between creativity and editorial standards.

Discussion

Technical communicators: creative or not?

One of the questions we asked our interviewees is “What blocks or encourages your creativity at work”, and here the answers were much more unappealable. Most technical communicators seem to think they are creative people, but they are not as creative as they actually would like to because of standards.

Here two testimonies:

“I that technical writing in itself has a very "non-creative" aspect - the structured writing, processes, templates, all require consistency. Creativity comes into play when it's time to create something new (set up a doc process, document a new type of product, create bridges between departments), but also to improve or fix something. What encourages creativity at work is mainly the freedom to try out new things”

“Almost everything I do has to be approved by my manager, who is not a TW at all. Thus, I cannot be as creative as I would like as I have to follow his way of thinking (his creativity somewhat). This is mainly for writing.”

These two testimonies show that there is a real clash between standards and creativity, and that according to them, creativity can totally be blocked by the use of standards, and the fact that most documentation produced needs to be approved before publishing. The fact that technical communicators cannot submit a documentation without it being approved is the main aspect blocking creativity if we believe the answers we received in the survey.

However, the majority of professionals interviewed say they feel creative whether it is in their daily life or at work if we refer to the previous results (cf. page 8). In the first testimony here, the interviewee says that creativity comes into play when they need to create something new. What can we conclude from this contradiction? Can technical communicators still be creative even when they follow rules?

That is the question we are going to try to answer: how to combine standards and creativity?

Editorial standards: is it a barrier to creativity?

Somehow, the previous testimonies answer this question. Editorial standards are a way to harmonise the documentation, inside a same entity in order to respect the brand image and to establish visual code for the user. But also in a same field of activity to facilitate the user experience.

Structure and markers are also essentials when learning. They allow the user to focus more on the content and the necessary information. Yet, it has also been established that visual, catchy elements and game-learning improve the learning experience. Those elements are the result of a creative work that wants to fit the learning-experience to the human mind.

Indeed, learning in our society can be seen as a formal process, based on theoretical and lecture courses. For instance, if a child is not good at school, we tend to think that he needs to focus more or to work harder. This way, the child will fit the current learning process. But what if we fit the learning process to the child's needs?

As technical communicators, our role is to simplify the user learning experience and to write information they will easily understand and remember. Creativity is not a way to bypass editorial standards, but it is a way to smartly fit the learning experience to the user's need.

Even though editorial standards do not allow a complete freedom of creativity, there are several ways to use creativity in order to serve those editorial standards.

Incorporating creativity into editorial standards

As demonstrated with the results of our survey, in order to add creativity in the documentation as a technical communicator, there needs to be a proper balance between creativity and editorial standards.

Having too much or a lack of one or the other can prove rather difficult for the technical communicator. The lack of creativity can have an impact on the technical communicator's work and development.

"I think that technical writing, by definition, is not a creative job. We have to respect the existing rules, guidelines, templates, etc, to make a consistent document at the end."

When the technical communicator writes the documentation, he visualizes the different and most effective ways in which he can present the information to the user. The uniformity of a document is a crucial point for a technical communicator, as it will partially determine if it is helpful to the user or

not. In that sense, a lack of creativity can cause the technical communicator to limit him/herself to a conventional form, and thus forsake the other possibilities to structure his/her document. For example, the documentation could be presented in a form that is easier to understand for the user. Not being creative enough to understand and see that a document could be improved for the sake of the user can also become a blocking point for the technical communicator.

Yet, trying to incorporate too much creativity in the work of a technical communicator isn't compatible with the use of guidelines and editorial standards.

A majority of technical communicators have to follow specific guidelines when they are working on a documentation. They are an essential part of technical writing as they help create a structured documentation and quality content. However, when these guidelines are too restricting, they can certainly turn into an obstacle for the technical communicator.

In our survey, we've asked the professionals if they thought editorial standards were a hindrance to creativity. Let's have a look at their responses:

"Editorial standards can block creativity if they are badly defined, too rigid, and too numerous. However, they seem necessary to guarantee a good level of quality and consistency. Creativity is not possible without basic rules to be followed."

"You always need guidelines (they help you understand who your users are, how to talk to them, what they need...), but TW should not always be black or white. Sometimes you need to think out of the box in order to express difficult topics"

"Editorial standards provide consistency so they are really important for big companies. Though, it implies some constraints that can limit creativity."

The professionals in these testimonies agree with the fact that guidelines and standards are essential to their work however, they also argue that too many editorial standards that aren't flexible enough, can only hinder their creativity.

In contrast, having these editorial standards doesn't necessarily mean that one cannot incorporate creativity in their work.

"Actually having standards to follow forces us to be creative to say what we want within the boundaries of the standards"

To some extent, even by following editorial standards, there is room for creativity as every technical communicator has their own way of assessing the information and structuring the documentation.

Let's take Isis as an example: she writes and structures technical content in a CMS (Content Management System), which is a technical documentation tool that enables the creation, organization and publishing of technical content. This CMS is based on structured content standard and uses topics, maps and output formats to generate documents. There are three different types of topics: concept topic, task topic and reference topic. They share similar elements like paragraphs, titles or short descriptions, but they each have a specific purpose and their own set of rules. For example, when Isis works on the documentation and writes a procedure, she chooses a topic task whose purpose is to provide procedural information on how to do something. In this particular topic, she cannot insert the element for a note. However, to workaround this guideline, she can insert the element for a note in a paragraph. This is one of the many alternatives she learns in the CMS, allowing her to express her creativity while still following the structured content standard.

Let us not forget that creativity, in a sense, is ever-present in the work of technical communicators as they have to constantly think of an efficient way to present the information to the user. And that statement is true for every technical communicator, regardless if they have to follow guidelines and editorial standards or not.

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Isis is an apprentice technical writer working for one of the world's leading producers of softwares for the management of business processes and a better data flow across organizations. With her colleagues, she works in collaboration with software engineers, to provide a simplified but complete documentation for users, on the software's new functionalities. She also edited a promotional video posted on the software's youtube page.

Although technical writing in the software industry can be quite arduous, she appreciates the opportunity of working on such a complex but interesting product, as well as witnessing the nuts and bolts of creating a software.



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