

UFR D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE LANGUES APPLIQUÉES

Why do technical writers have to justify their existence?

Louise AGERON, Tanguy CACHIN, Marina FERREOL

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Abstract:

With the way new technologies are evolving nowadays, technical writers appear to play an important role. Their mission is to help users understand and use a new product or software. They create content that is easy to understand to all and adapt their discourses depending on whom they are addressing their message. We noticed that technical writers, however, still struggled to justify and explain their existence. We wondered whether the profession was widely known, and realized that it was not. We then retracted a brief overview of the profession and realized that being a technical writer had many definitions to it, and the job associated with the terms were broad and different, which reinforces the identity and existence crisis. We also wondered how technical writers were seen by their colleagues, and we found out that they were not seen as a priority by many, probably because of the influence of the old workflow system where technical writers were placed last.

Keywords: technical writing, added value, technical communication, existence, skills

Introduction

The field of technical writing is growing fast. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the job outlook for technical writers in the US is expected to grow 8% from 2018 to 2028, which means there will be 8% more positions for technical writers¹. The reason for that growth, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, is because the “*growing reliance on technology and the increasing demand for complex medical and scientific information will create job opportunities for technical writers*”. Companies seek to employ experienced and trained technical writers. But what exactly do technical writers do? The main mission of a technical writer is to write and follow strict norms to produce efficient documentation: most of the content they produce is based on a variation of English, called technical English, to write efficiently and simply. The goal is to produce content that is not ambiguous, easy to understand, and straight to the point to help the user understand or use a product. As users or customers, when we buy a product, we expect to be guided through the process of use or installation, especially if it is something totally new. Installing a brand new software requires instructions. Using new functionalities in software requires instructions. Having a brand new phone that does not look like anything we are used to requires instructions to help us use it. Manipulating a piece of equipment to place it somewhere requires instructions, so as to not break the machine, or to avoid doing something that would cause damage.

While the position of a technical writer is widely known in English-speaking countries, as we have seen in the US, in other countries, the position of the technical writer seems relatively unknown, especially in France. Based on our experience of young technical writers, most people seem unaware of the core of the profession: is it translation? is it just writing instructions? It is unclear to people what the missions are exactly, and explaining it seems even harder. Even within companies that employ technical writers, their missions can be relatively misunderstood, and their roles questioned, which is what we decided to focus on in our article. According to our above statements, technical writers do seem important and necessary, but we noticed a pattern in the way people view technical writing. Because technical writers produce content that is easy to understand, to deliver clear, concise instructions and that can turn complex concepts into simple sentences that the user or customer can easily understand, which is what we call *vulgarization*. Yet, all of these missions are often seen as easy tasks for non-technical writers. So we wondered why technical writers had to justify their existence and their missions. We decided to explore three main hypotheses that we wanted to discuss and test via a survey.

¹ US Bureau of Statistics. *Technical Writer*. Retrieved June 8, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/Media-and-Communication/Technical-writers.htm#tab-6>

First, we considered the fact that the profession was relatively unknown among students and people in general.

Our second hypothesis was that the missions were misunderstood, and the importance of technical writing diminished.

Our third and final hypothesis was that technical writers did not realize their own importance and, therefore, did not take credits for what they are producing, thus participating in not valorizing the profession in the eyes of their colleagues.

Methods

Survey & Interviews

To test our hypothesis, we decided to write a survey. We sent the survey to our network on Facebook, LinkedIn, or to our colleagues. We wanted to get as many respondents as possible to have a broad view of technical writing. The survey was made to answer our thesis statement: why do technical writers have to justify their existence?. We created our survey into two parts.

The first part was a general part to which both technical writers and non-technical writers could answer. This general part focused on the knowledge of technical writing that people had: how did you hear about technical writing? are you a technical writer or do you work with technical workers? would you say you have a fair understanding of the missions of a technical writer? This part was made to test our first hypothesis and test whether the profession was known and whether our colleagues could indeed tell what a technical writer does. The second part was for technical writers only. The point of this part was to get the opinion of technical writers on their profession, their importance, and whether they thought their colleagues had good knowledge of their profession.

What we wanted to get from this survey were answers that could help us draw parallels between the different professional environments and the perception of technical writing. We wanted to see if there was a universal truth or rather multiple realities in which technical writers existed. For example, if you work with a company that employs 20 technical writers, do the non-technical writers of the company know the missions of a technical writer better than the non-technical writers in a company that employs one or two technical writers? What we wanted to see was whether there existed nuances. The results we received are discussed in the following part.

Results & Analysis

To understand why technical writers have to justify their existence, we considered the hypothesis that perhaps the profession was not known enough, which would explain why technical writers would need to justify and explain why their profession matters. We asked the following question:

1. How did you first hear about technical writing?



The majority of our respondents (54,5%) said it was by their own research, while nearly 23% declared they had heard of technical writing through someone else. What these two statistics show is that the majority of people know of the profession after personal research. This statement seems to validate the hypothesis that the profession is not known enough as of now in France if people need to search for it. Our hypothesis is that there is a lack of professionals to talk about the profession to students or a vast misconception of what language studies can lead to.

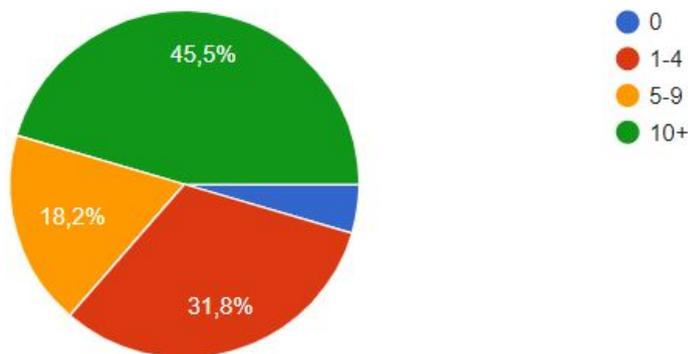
We also wondered whether the fact the profession almost always requires an excellent level of English would hurt the renown of the profession in France. Based on the job offerings we received in July 2019, 30 out of the 35 required to be bilingual in English, which represents 87% of the job offerings. Our predecessors also asked last year what language their peers used in their profession, and 60% declared they used English, and 52% of their respondents declared they did not work in their mother tongue². What these statements show is that English indeed dominated the field of technical writing. Yet,

² Typhaine BERTEZ, Céleste WICKER. *The Impact of Global Language in Technical Writing*, Retrieved July 13 2020, https://f-origin.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1236/files/2019/12/global_language_BERTEZ_WICKER.pdf.

according to a study conducted by the Education First, the English level for French native is average at best, meaning that most French people could potentially handle an informal conversation, but would not be able to make a full, professional presentation in English³. When we compare what we previously mentioned and the data of this study, we realize that a gap exists between the requirements of the profession and the level of English of French people. This probably explains why the profession appears to be relatively new in France, and relatively niche and reserved for students that study languages. But the study of Education First also reveals that the English level of French people aged 21-25 keeps on increasing, so we can assume that in the next few years, there might be more candidates, and the profession might gain popularity. Our first hypothesis was partially true: not a lot of people seem aware of the profession unless they search for it, or work with technical writers.

We then wanted to test our second hypothesis that technical writers also had to justify their existence because their missions were misunderstood and diminished. While we know there is a high demand for technical writers in the job market, we assumed that the profession should be well known in professional circles, and the skills of a technical writer should be well recognized. We asked the following question:

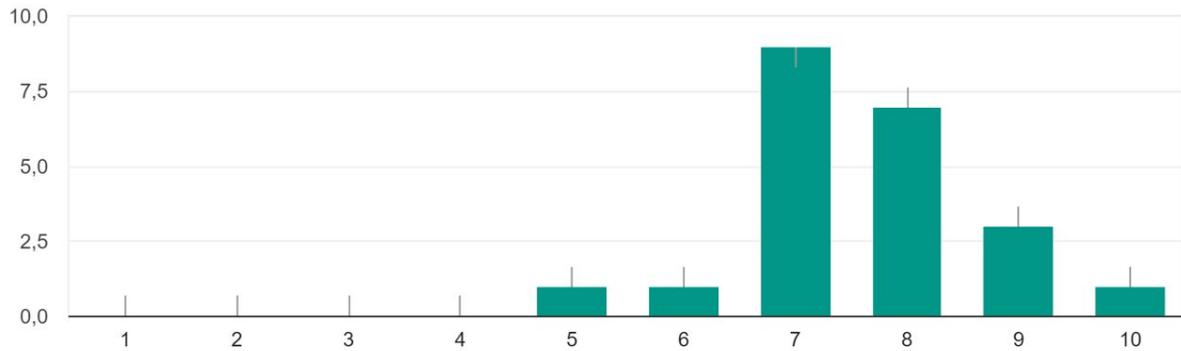
Can you estimate how many TW your company employs?



Most of our respondents could estimate how many technical writers worked in their company. The two top answers were 10 and above (45,5%), and 1-4 (nearly 32%). What seems pretty interesting is the tendency that a company either has fewer than four technical writers, or more than 10. It shows that the service is either small or large, only a minority seems to have an average-sized service of technical writers (18%).

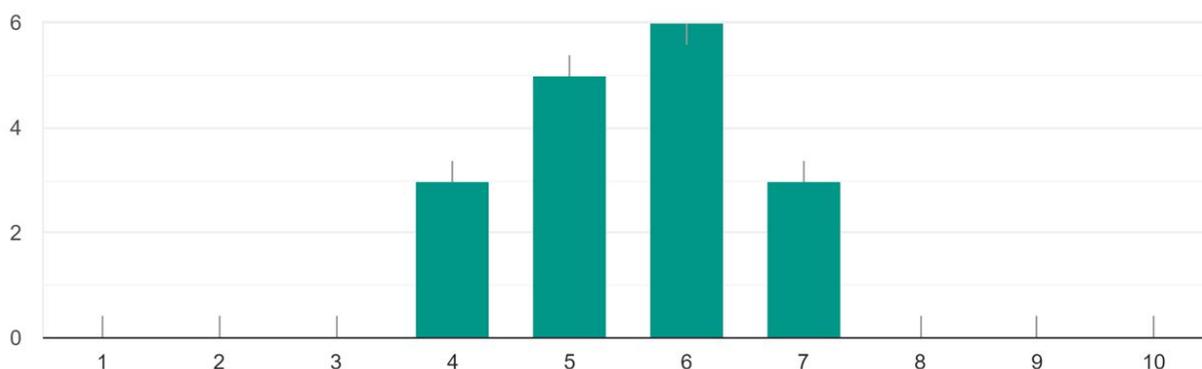
We then asked the respondents if they could rate their understanding of what technical writing consisted of, on a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being the highest, 0 the lowest..

³ Julie-Anne Pruvost. *Niveau de maîtrise de l'anglais en France en 2018*. Retrieved June 8, 2020, <https://www.languagebooster.fr/niveau-maitrise-anglais-france-2018/>



Out of the answers we got, only 9% of the respondents gave a score below 7. What this indicates, though, is that people seem to think they know technical writing. So our hypothesis that technical writing was misunderstood could be proven partially wrong. To truly prove whether our hypothesis was true or false, a quiz on the missions of a technical writer could have been useful to make sure people did not overestimate their knowledge, for example. However, based on the results we got, the data shows that nearly 91% of the respondents said they know what technical writing consisted of. This could also prove that our theory according to which technical writing was well known in companies that employ technical writers is true.

What is interesting to point out, also, is that we asked technical writers only to rate their understanding of what technical writing was when they first started their careers.



All of the answers were between 4 and 7, which indicates that their understanding of what technical writing was increased, as there was no answer below 7 in the question for their understanding now. However, a disparity also appears when we asked technical writers to rate the understanding of their colleagues about technical writing. 52% of the answers were a 6 or below (6% for 3; 12% for 4; and 18% for 5 and 6). Again, what this shows is a difference between this data and the data we got from the first question. There are three possible interpretations:

1. Technical writers underestimate the understanding of their colleagues, who know well what technical writers do.

2. Non-technical writers truly understand the missions of a technical writer well, while technical writers think they do not.
3. Non-technical writers assume they understand the missions of a technical writer well, but they do not.

To know which interpretation is correct would just be a guess. We believe that a test should be done to verify which data is the most representative. However, we ourselves started wondering if we knew exactly the missions of a technical writer. While discussing, we realized that between the three of us, our missions could not be more different: one was working on writing XML files based on the DITA norm, one used Framemaker and Text Pad to create her documentation and one was working on Captivate to create communication content. So we wondered: what does a technical writer do exactly?

We found an article that explained in plain words why it is so complicated to clearly state what a technical writer does: *“What used to be referred to as technical writing, we’re now talking about technical communication, because there’s a broader range of areas, people are working on a broad range of types of outputs”*⁴. This quote sums up the difficulty of clearly defining the missions of a technical writer. There seems to be a generalization of the term. In fact, the name “technical writing” changed to “technical communicator” as the quote states, which, in a way, could seem more abstract, but which reflects the reality of the profession: are technical writers still only writers? The answer is no, at least today they are not. To clarify our point, the following quote retraces the history of the profession in a short manner:

“(…) Eventually, we moved away from printing to PDFs because people could just download them online. (...) And eventually, we moved to help online. We even started using videos for teaching people how to do things. I think that 300-page documents will still be [around] somewhere in the background, but that’s not the primary way a user figures out how to use something [these days].”

What this means is that as the means of providing content changed, the supports changed, and the missions of a technical writer followed. What used to be written books or documentation that were published in paper format has become for the most part

⁴ Chris Stokel-Walker. *Let’s talk about docs*. Retrieved June 8, 2020, <https://increment.com/documentation/lets-talk-about-docs-evolution-of-tech-doc/>

PDF-based documentation which slowly became online portals where you can find all the information you need in HTML format. Sure, all three forms coexist nowadays. But the tendency is going towards online documentation. What that means is that the requirements for the profession are different. While, at first, you needed to know how to use office software and write technical English, today, a technical writer would need to know how to write technical English, but also use other technologies, such as XML or DITA to create their documentation. The skills evolved and complexified, but still coexist. There are still technical writers who produce books or PDFs, and there are technical writers who only produced online documentation based on an XML/HTML transformation. And even that is not the final step of technical communication, as a tendency appears towards e-learning, which questions the writing part of the profession as such: e-learning uses videos or quiz to deliver its messages. Sure enough, there is still text on the screen, but not as much as there was text in a PDF or a book or an online portal of documentation. In fact, nowadays, 74% of French companies use e-learning⁵, which also highlights the high demand for such content. An e-learning professional knows how to write storyboards and use software such as Captivate. But what do e-learning professionals and XML/DITA writers have in common, for example? They produce content, which is enough to assemble all these requirements and skills under one term, that is “technical communicator”. So a technical communicator does not designate one single professional, but rather a term that designates all the people who produce content in any form. Even though the skills and outputs are different, and, therefore, the missions.

The final quote we chose from the article further proves this point: *“Some of us are moving away from the term “documentation.” We’re using terms like “information” because the technology is changing so rapidly”*. Talking only about documentation seems outdated, as a technical writer or communicator produces all sorts of content to organize the information. Perhaps the main issue here is the fact “technical communicator” is a term that envelops various and different skills, which makes it hard for people to precisely know what a technical communicator does precisely.

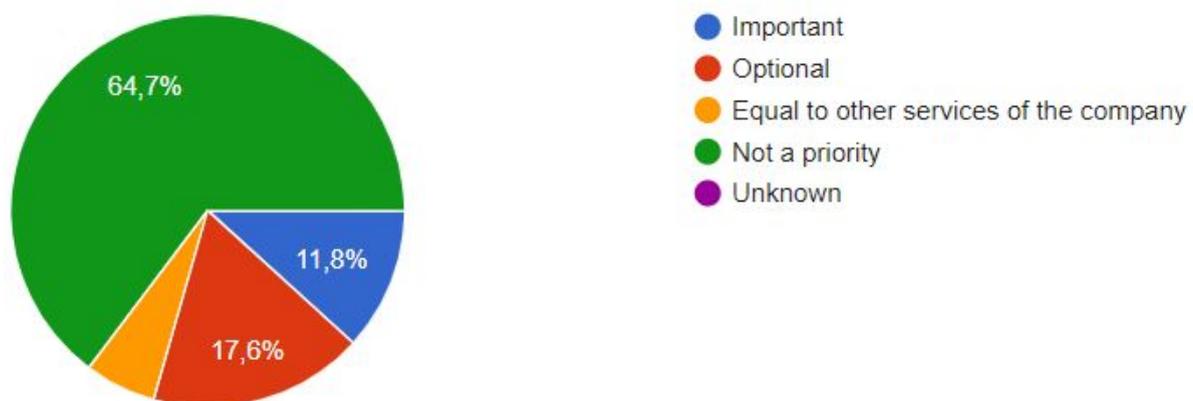
With all of that in mind, we also wanted to verify whether technical writers were well represented in their companies. The question was to be answered with a free text. From what we read, we could estimate that about 30% of the respondents said yes, 40% said yes, but said they either did not have the same power as other services / were not as important

⁵ Mathilde Istin. *Les chiffres 2020 du digital learning*, Retrieved July 12 2020.
https://www.e-learning-letter.com/info_article/m/1887/les-chiffres-2020-du-digital-learning.html?utm_source=Sarbacane&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ELL-270-200127

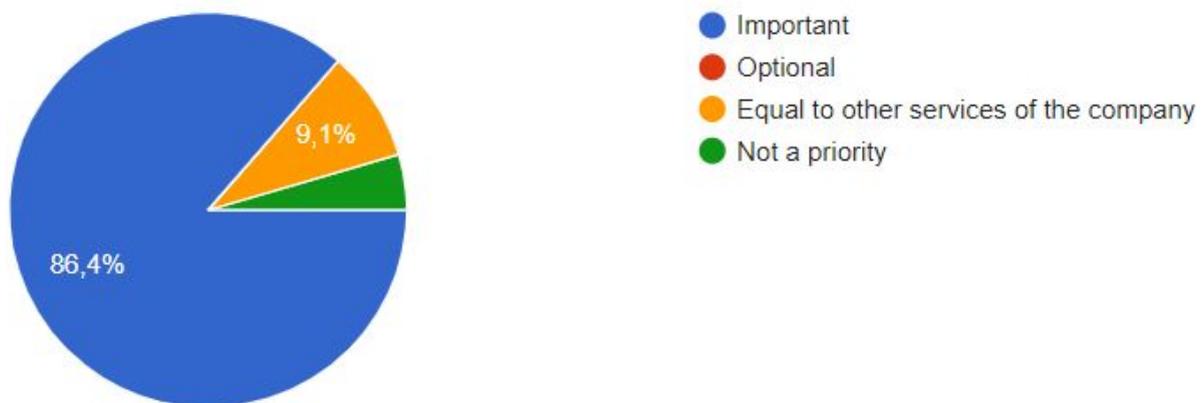
as others, and the other 30% simply stated that they were not. As a reminder, a company board is a board that meets regularly and decides on the direction of the company's policies. They impact all of the employees, and they can represent and serve the interest of the employees. When a profession is represented by someone of a certain service, then this person can bring the profession into important discussions, bring consideration to the service, etc. So according to the answers we got, we realized that there might be a lack of representation or voice given to technical writers, which would explain why they need to justify their existence. To prove our point, we chose some of the answers to illustrate our argument:

- “Yes [technical writing is represented in the board], but [it] is not considered as important as other services”.
- “Yes, even though I think upper-management do not really understand the need for [technical writing], but colleagues do”.

So we asked whether non-technical writers believed technical writing was important:



Nearly 65% said they believed that technical writing was not a priority, and 18% that technical writing is optional. In regard to the previous data, it shows that there is a clear diminishment of the profession. All of this further proves why technical writers need to justify their existence: if their colleagues see them as unimportant or not a priority, it is hard to indeed assert your importance. Yet, when we asked technical writers about their perception of the profession, the answers that we received were very different:



While technical writers do see themselves as important for a company, it does not seem like they appear to be for their colleagues.

The final hypothesis we wanted to verify had to do with the way technical writers think of their profession in terms of business impact. Do technical writers think they play an important role in the success of a product? Are they integrated? When a team of people works on creating a product or software, they have in mind the fact that this product or software must bring money, and be rentable. They think about the business dimension of their activity. For most people, for a product to be successful, the marketing around it must be perfect: advertisements, communication, design, etc. But what about technical writing? If we take a look back at our survey, it would appear that all technical writers believe they do play a part in the success of a product. A respondent said:

“If users cannot work their way around the product with the instructions provided (actual documentation, error messages, general UI), they’ll simply stop using it and get a similar product elsewhere)”.

When you design a product or software, you always have to keep in mind how the users will perceive it, depending on your target audience. If you create a phone for seniors, for example, you will most likely make the text bigger, have the keys also bigger, perhaps avoid tactile display or simplify it as much as possible, or at least have a screen that is big enough to display apps or widgets so that they appear big. Basically, you will try to adapt to your target audience by creating a product that fits their needs and be easy to use for them. In technical writing, the process is the same. If you want to explain to a senior how to use their phone, you will perhaps explain the way the screen works if it is tactile, remind them of

the touch gestures you can perform to achieve certain actions. The way you will explain that to the senior will not be the same as if you explained it to a teenager who already had many tactile phones before and who knows his way around the technology. The question at hand here is whether technical writing is, in fact, used and useful for the marketing of a product.

In *Developing Quality Technical Information: A Handbook for Writers and Editors*, Michelle Carey explains that technical writers are becoming more involved in the user interface, which validates the point our respondents' answers made that technical writers are indeed useful in terms of designing a product. Yet, according to Michelle Carey, even though technical writers are more and more involved in earlier phases of the product, the generality is different: most technical writers are still not involved in those phases and must write documentation that is based on a user interface that was poorly made or thought out. What this creates is a discrepancy between the product and the documentation, where the documentation becomes very heavy and loaded with information, that could have perhaps been implemented in the product itself. For Michelle Carey:

“By participating in the design process in partnership with product developers, usability engineers, visual designers, and customers, technical writers can promote clear interaction and wise use of embedded assistance, thereby reducing or eliminating the likelihood of “papering the product” with unnecessary documentation.”

If so, all elements point to technical writers being full of advantages: less paper means fewer costs for the companies, clearer product means the reputation of the brand becomes stronger and more user friendly. So why are technical writers not more involved in the process? For Michelle Carey, this is caused by the old model, known as the waterfall development process, where a team has a specific role, and when the team is done, they hand the project to another team who will do their task, and so on. Then, technical writers who write content to explain what the product does and how to use it would logically be last, which would explain why they are not involved nowadays, and why they are seen as the last link of the chain. It is a reminiscence of how things used to work before.

Conclusion

It seems clear that our three hypotheses, even though there can be multiple other with more of less importance, were correct. The profession is not yet known enough in everyday life for people to be aware of and understand the profession. Moreover, most of the time, it seems like people who do know technical writers assume they know quite well what technical writers do when the term itself represents a myriad of realities, which make it hard to truly know what the missions of technical writers are. Even though for technical writers it is clearer. Technical writers suffer from the old organization and are still seen as the last links of a long chain. Nowadays, though, technical writers are gaining in importance. The tendency is slowly going up, meaning that technical writer fights hard to prove their existence, but when it is proven, their importance is rarely questioned after. To help more, we, as young technical writers, must be proud of our job and make it acknowledged from the most. We must realize that we do is essential. We must make sure the field is known by the students by spreading the message, and we must be ready to accept change within the profession, because, as we mentioned before, the profession is evolving as quickly as the technologies are. It is even more true today than before because every day new technologies are created and developed. And for Henrietta Nickels Shirk, technical writers are “influential equals” as computer scientists, we just need to revendicate it.

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