

Improving Technical Communication Skills

This 4-session course covers best practices that help you create effective, usable documents. You can apply the principles and techniques you learn in this class to many different writing situations—whether you’re writing reports that summarize results, detailing how to use a product, describing a theory of operations, or writing a detailed email.

Over the course of 5 weeks, we’ll meet in four sessions of 3 to 3 ½ hours. Each session will include presentation, discussion, and practice. Please bring one or more samples of documents you’ve worked on recently (either complete or in-progress). And bring your questions!

Course Topics Include

Setting the Stage

Make a plan, even if it’s short

- Identify your purpose and goal**
What are your objectives?
What do you want to communicate?
- Identify your audiences**
Who will read this document?
Under what circumstances will they read it?
What are their goals?
- Determine the scope**
How big is this document?
How comprehensive?
What will it cover? What will it omit?
When must it be complete?

Techniques for Clear Writing

Make information scannable

- With “scannable” information, the reader can quickly tell**
What is this about?
Does this have the information I need?
Am I in the right place?
- Use these techniques to make information scannable**
Start with a scannable overview
Pull out key ideas and present them as bullet points
Use frequent headings, consistent levels, and parallel grammar

Write for easy access

- Present ideas sequentially**
Most important to least important
Easiest to hardest
First to last
- Write effective sentences**
Put first things first
Omit needless words
Use active voice, present tense
Break long sentences
Always proof-read
Learn your own grammar pitfalls

Writing Different Types of Information

Primary types of information

- Conceptual**
- Procedural (step-by-step)**
- Reference**

The writer’s context

- Matching audience and objectives to information type**

Writing overviews

- Introductions**
- Concepts**
- Examples**
- Cross-references**

Writing Procedures

- Keep the purpose in mind**
- Use standard procedural styles**
Start with a purpose statement to provide context
Identify necessary materials and other prerequisites up front
Separate actions and results
- Decide what level of detail to provide**
- Decide how to handle notes and exceptions**
- Break a long procedure into a group of smaller ones**

Reference

- What is reference information?**
Details
Facts
Repeating patterns of information
- Writing strategies for reference information**
Identify the pieces
Develop a pattern, decide on the organization
Apply it consistently