

Technical Writing Course Topics for Engineers

Techniques for Clear Writing

Make a plan, even if it's short

- Identify your purpose and goals**
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?

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

Course Options

Half-day session (3.5 hours) presents concepts and examples, provides class discussion and interaction.

Full-day session (6-7 hours) includes hands-on practice.

Two-session course (3.5 hours, several days apart) allows participants to integrate concepts with their own work.

(Optional: Instructor feedback on external assignment.)

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

Course Options

This course can be adapted to focus on information types most critical for your company. This is best determined through analysis of some typical documents.

Half-day session (3.5 hours) provides concepts, examples, and class discussion, and can be combined with half-day session of *Techniques for Clear Writing*

Full-day session (6-7 hours) provides more depth, includes hands-on practice.

Three-session course (3.5 per session) provides practice with each type of information.

Writing for Online Presentation

The shift from paper to online

- Why companies are moving information online
- How users respond
- How it affects the writer

Differences when writing for online

- Context—the user can enter at many points without seeing the larger context**
- Navigation**
How the user moves around
Showing what other information is available
- References**
“Below” and “above” no longer mean the same thing
Chapters and Parts don’t have the same meaning
- Pages versus topics**
- Chunking—how much information should the user get at one time?**
- Reading on screen instead of on paper**

Changes in the information architecture

- Hierarchy versus category
- Flattening out levels
- Providing multiple methods of access

Possible new tools

- Online help tools
- Web-authoring tools
- Content management systems

Course Options

Half-day session (3.5 hours) provides concepts, examples, and class discussion, and can be combined with another half-day course.

Full-day session (6-7 hours) provides more depth, includes hands-on practice developing information for online presentation.

Custom Courses and Workshops

Additional courses and workshops can be developed to meet your company’s needs.

About the Instructor

Linda Urban has been a technical communicator and information designer for 20 years.

She is an instructor in the Technical Communication programs at the UC Santa Cruz Extension and the UC Berkeley Extension, where she consistently receives excellent reviews from her students.

She works as an independent consultant as well as an instructor, and brings techniques used on real-world projects to the classroom.

Linda has experience developing online help, writing manuals and other paper documents, developing instructor guides and course materials, coordinating and facilitating usability testing of products and information, and participating in user interface design. She has worked with both large and small companies.