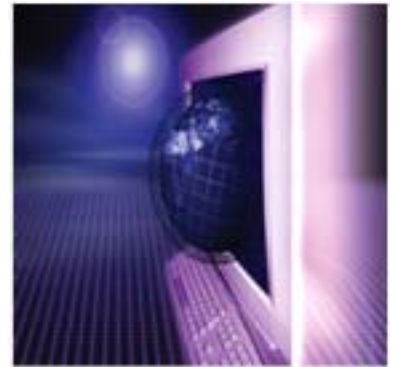
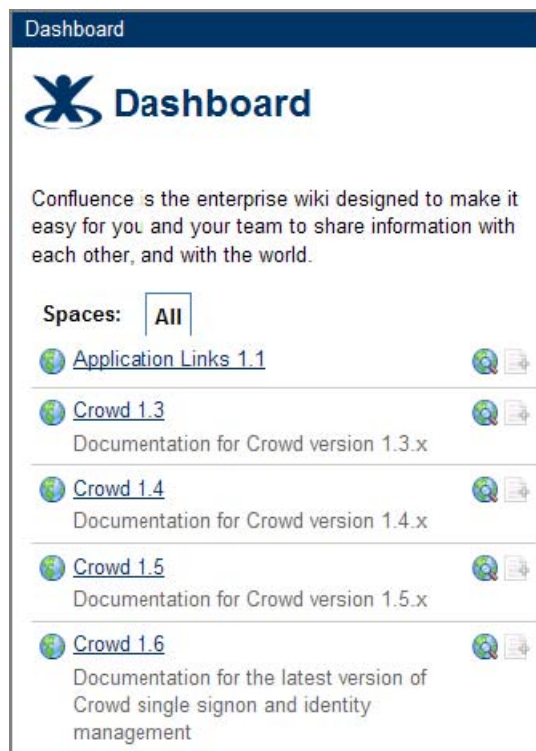


Trends in British Technical Communication

Using a Wiki for Technical Documentation



Directory of Standards

Google Wizard Writer

Software Documentation – How Much?

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From the Editor's Desk

by Sue Woolley

I recently attended the ASTC (NSW) / PLAIN conference in Sydney. It was a fascinating two days, but what struck me the most was that, as technical communicators, we have always been at the forefront of plain English writing. We use simple words, short sentences, active voice and write for our audience. These are some of the main principles of plain English writing. All we have to do now is work out how to use our skills to improve legal, government and contract writing!

In this issue, wikis, crows and standards. This reflects the interesting range of articles we have for you this time in Southern Communicator.

Sarah Maddox has contributed an article on ways to successfully use a wiki for technical documentation. She was a complete newcomer to wikis two years ago, and shares her tips on workflow, tracking, structure and release management.

Do you want to know what standards apply to documentation? **Richard Hodgkinson** has made a comprehensive list of all the standards that may be applicable to the documentation arena. Richard has been working tirelessly in the standards area for many years, and although now retired from paid work, he still finds time to pursue his interest in developing and maintaining standards for documentation.

What do crows and technical communicators have in common? I am not even going to begin to explain, so you'll have to read **Melanie Doulton's** intriguing article to find out.

Marian Newell is the editor of the ISTC Communicator journal in the UK. She has written about the technical communication profession in the UK. This article will be of interest to anyone who is thinking about working in the UK, but there are also many parallels with the technical communication profession in Australia and New Zealand which makes it interesting reading for all of us.

A free Google wizard writer? Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? But it's not. Wordware in Melbourne have developed the wizard writer called gStepOne. **Greg Collette** explains "But what if rather than simply receiving a list of passive information, we also received an interactive, Google-generated wizard with each step linked to the appropriate web information, videos and tools providing us guidance and all about how to do things? ...Google changes from collective memory to virtual helper."

How much should you document software applications? This is a topic close to my heart, and I have described what I think you should document, and what the software developers should be doing to make a software product easy to use.

Happy reading!

Housekeeping

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Deadline September 19.

Foreword:

Viva le Joint Conference

by Geoffrey Marnell

Geoffrey Marnell is the Vice-President, ASTC (Vic). He teaches technical writing and editing in the English Department at the University of Melbourne. He is also the founder and managing director of Abelard Consulting Pty Ltd, a documentation consultancy providing technical writing services, technical communicator placement services, and training in technical and scientific writing.

The recent PLAIN–ASTC conference was a marriage made in heaven. The recommendations of the Plain English movement dovetail nicely with the philosophy that drives contemporary technical communication. The Plain English practitioner and the technical communicator both stress the importance of communicative efficiency, of getting our message across with the least effort on the part of our readers. We both aim for the end of the communication spectrum farthest away from the tangled convolutions of bureaucratise.

The PLAIN–ASTC conference should prompt us to consider how we might further exploit the idea of joint conferences with other professions.

These days technical communicators are also document designers, graphic artists, indexers, content architects and much more. Perhaps there is sufficient overlap with the work of professionals working solely in these fields to justify joint conferences.

But there is one profession in particular where a joint conference is almost certain to be synergistic: the profession of *editing*. Many technical communicators spend a good deal of their working time doing pretty much what editors do—reviewing, correcting and suggesting—and many editors edit technical texts. Thus an editor–technical communicator conference might well offer rich opportunities for professional cross-pollination.

So what might each take from the other? For a start, technical communicators can learn much from the conventional practices of editors. For instance, an appreciation of the value of the proofreading mark-up language, common in the editing profession, would help standardise, clarify and simplify our own reviewing processes. Further, the adoption of editing style sheets—universal throughout the editing profession—might prompt us to adopt a more disciplined approach to our writing, limiting the cognitive burden on our readers by minimising the distraction caused by unnecessary synonyms and by inconsistent punctuation and hyphenation.

What might editors take from technical communicators? One possibility is *our work*—or at least some of it. And this is no bad thing. Technical communicators working in a team of writers have the benefit of a colleague to give their drafts a language review. But not so the solo writer. Many solo writers admit to editing their own drafts. But self-editing is an oxymoronic practice. There is no difference between editing one's one work and simply writing another draft of it. Thus to self-edit is not to edit at all. Editing always requires a second pair of eyes. Writers are usually so close to their drafts that they read what they think they have written, not what they have actually written. That's a lesson we learn early in our careers, often reinforced with embarrassment. (How did we miss such an obvious typo?) And that's why the editing phase is essential in any documentation development lifecycle.

So, if a second pair of eyes is necessary, why shouldn't the solo writer take advantage of the eyes of a professional editor, someone whose professional life centres on fine-tuning the language of

others? This is something the solo writer can do right now. Local branches of the Society of Editors publish registers of freelance editors. Moreover, an external edit can easily be slotted into a project plan without necessarily incurring slippage or significant additional costs.

But fine-tuning, while vital, is only one skill an editor can offer. Just as a book editor will—in addition to fine-tuning the author's language—check facts, query inconsistencies and note structural shortcomings, an editor of a user manual could query poorly ordered steps in a procedure, the lack of a warning message where injury lurks, an imperative preceding a condition, and any number of other omissions or weaknesses that would otherwise rob the manual of some degree of usability. But they could only do this, of course, if they knew what technical communicators do and what they hope to achieve—knowledge we would happily share at a joint conference knowing that the overall result would likely be a win for both professions.

So here's to a joint ASTC–Society of Editors–TCANZ conference. Do I have a seconder?

The PLAIN–ASTC conference should prompt us to consider how we might further exploit the idea of joint conferences with other professions.



Using a Wiki for Technical Documentation

by Sarah Maddox

Sarah Maddox is one of five technical communicators at Atlassian¹. She writes a blog titled 'feathers'² and lives in a house on a hill near Sydney.

This article describes procedures based on the out-of-the-box Confluence tools. There are alternatives available for a more automated workflow via plugins. Specifically, a number of people use the Approvals Workflow plugin³ and the Content Publishing plugin⁴ with great success.

Introduction

Is it possible to use a wiki for technical documentation? Yes, most definitely. I started working on a wiki two years ago, with no prior experience of wikis (apart from the occasional encounter with Wikipedia) but with plentiful experience of technical writing. I've learned a lot and I'd like to pass on some tips to you too.

About wikis

At its simplest, a wiki is a set of server-side software that allows you to edit a web page in your browser (client side) and publish the updated page immediately. Click, edit, save, and you're done.

There are many brands of wiki, including Confluence, MediaWiki (on which Wikipedia is hosted), MindTouch and TWiki.

These days, most wikis have sophisticated administration and editing features that elevate them above the simple 'click, edit, save' offering. These enhancements make it feasible, even enjoyable and efficient, to use a wiki for technical documentation.

Just as with any other tool, we need to assess our audience, available platforms, and subject matter before deciding on a wiki for content authoring and publication.

For this article, let's assume that you have chosen to use a wiki and let's look at the ways you can bend the wiki features to suit the needs of technical documentation. I'm using Confluence⁵, the 'enterprise wiki' developed by Atlassian¹. I also work as a technical communicator at Atlassian.

Workflow

First let's look at the wiki tools you can use in the documentation development process: drafting, reviewing and eventually publishing a document.

The basic workflow is simple:

- Create a wiki page with restricted permissions. For example, you might restrict viewing to a group of people such as your team or, on a public wiki, all staff members.
- Write the page content.
- Ask other people to review the page. They can add comments to the page or simply edit the page content directly.
- When ready, delete the comments and remove the permission restrictions. The page has now been published.

Figure 1 shows a page under review. Notice the lock icon at top left, indicating that restricted permissions apply to this page.

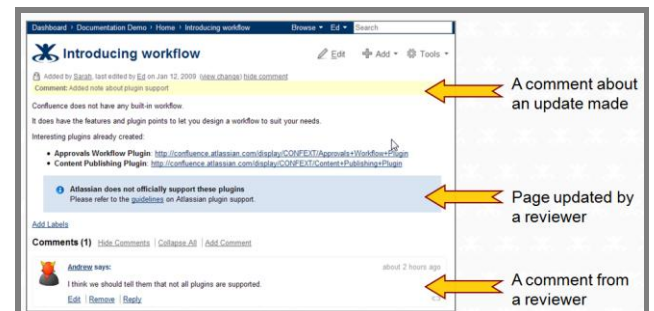


Figure 1: A Confluence page under review

Tracking

On a wiki, it's quite usual for a number of different people to update a single page. For a technical communicator, it's useful or indeed essential to know what happens to your document, both during review and after publication.

We'll look at how you can see what's happened to a single page, and also how you can make sure you know when an edit has been made.

First, let's look at a single page. The page history shows the version created each time someone edited the page, with date, author and any comments made. Notice that you can also revert to a specific version.

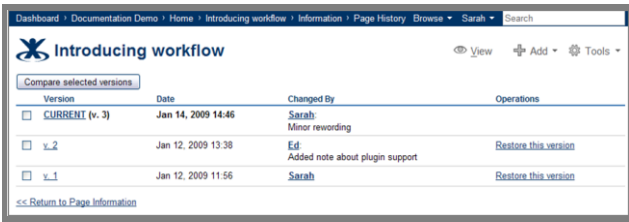


Figure 2: Page history

You can also select any two versions and ask for a comparison, to see what has changed between those two versions. The red highlight shows deleted text, and green shows added text.

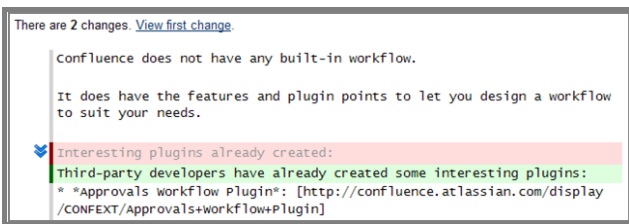


Figure 3: Using the diff function to compare pages

It's all very well to go to a specific page and see what's happened to it, but how do you know when to go and look at the page?

In Confluence, you can monitor updates to your documentation via 'watches' and via RSS feeds.

Using the Confluence Watch feature, you can 'watch' a page or an entire space (collection of pages). Whenever anyone updates the page or space, you will receive a notification in your email inbox.

In Confluence, you will organise your wiki pages within a space. This is a logical collection of pages, comparable to a library. A space is configurable and managed independently within a wiki site. It's almost like a wiki within a wiki.

RSS feeds provide another way to do it. The simplest way to build an RSS feed is to use Confluence's **Feed Builder**, accessible from the Dashboard. This will give you a URL that you can ping to get the latest updates. You can choose how to read the RSS messages, such as via an RSS reader or an email client. For non-documentation RSS feeds, I like the Sage add-on⁶ for Firefox. For my documentation feeds, I use the Thunderbird email client⁷.

Figure 4 shows Thunderbird inbox, displaying the documentation feeds. They look just like email messages. When you open one, you see the content of the page and the updates done. You can then click through to the page itself on the wiki.

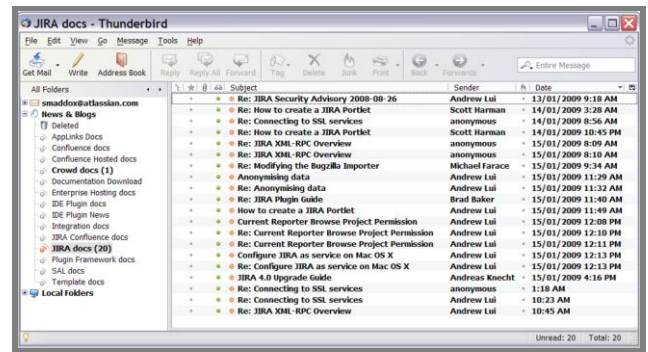


Figure 4: RSS feeds in Thunderbird email client

Permissions

In most wikis, it's usual to allow a number of different people to view, comment on and even update the content. For technical documentation, we often need some control over the update permissions.

Confluence has a fairly robust and granular permissions scheme. There are three levels:

- Global permissions apply across the entire site.
- Space permissions apply to a space. For our purposes as document managers, these are the most useful and relevant.
- Page permissions allow you to restrict the editing and viewing of a specific page.

Space permissions are quite granular. You can control who can create (or delete) pages in the space, create (or delete) comments, and so on. You can grant a permission to users, to groups and to anonymous users (people who have not logged in).

For example, you might allow your team full edit and administration rights while others can only add comments.

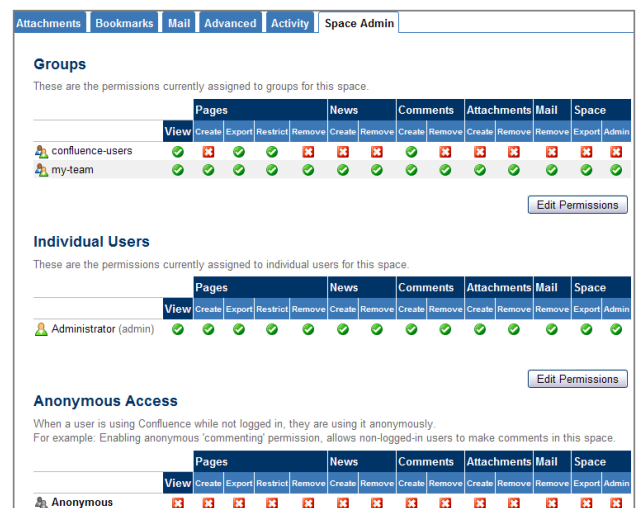


Figure 5: Space permissions

Structure and chaos

Many wikis are unstructured. Some may be quite chaotic. The thinking is that people will use the wiki's search feature to find what they need. That works, but for technical documentation we need something more.

- We need to show people the scope of the documentation and help them find what they're looking for even if they don't know exactly what that is.
- We also need to optimise the time we spend on content creation and management, to make the best possible use of limited technical writing time and people.

Here are some tips and techniques we use for adding structure to and implementing content re-use in a Confluence wiki.

Table of contents

We use the `{toc}` and `{toc-zone}` macros to create a table of contents at the top of a page, showing the headings within that page.

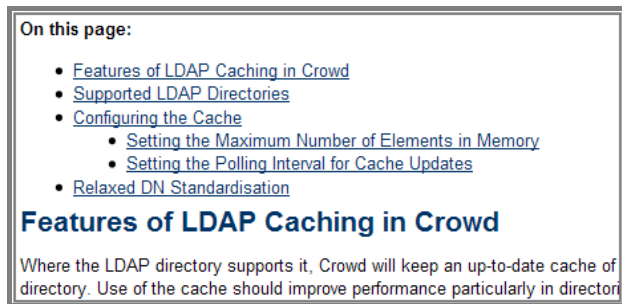


Figure 6: Table of contents at the top of a page

For some real live examples, take a look at:

- The documentation page⁸ from which Figure 6 was taken.
- Our release notes⁹, for a nice way of listing the release highlights via the `{toc}` macro.

Tip: When viewing any Confluence page, you can see the macros and other markup by using the **Tools** menu and selecting **View Wiki Markup**.

Left-hand navigation bar

You can insert a left-hand navigation bar in your space, showing a full table of contents of all pages in the space. There are detailed instructions in the Confluence documentation¹⁰. See it in action on the above page. In Figure 7, there's a partial screenshot.

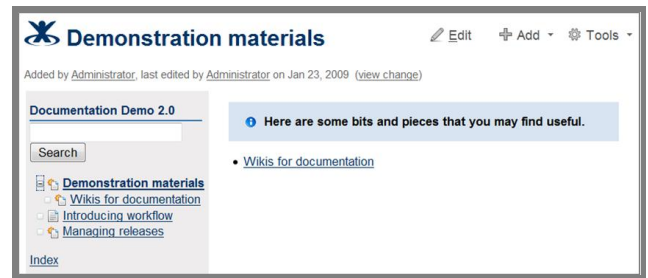


Figure 7: Left-hand navigation bar

Page ordering

Confluence allows you to arrange your pages into any order you like. This means that you can put the chapters and sections into a logical rather than just plain alphabetical order. You can move a single page or a page and all its children. Confluence will respect the new order everywhere: in the wiki display, in its PDF and HTML exports and when used by various macros such as `{children}` and `{pagetree}`.

To technical communicators, it may seem strange to mention this seemingly-obvious feature; but not all wikis allow arbitrary page ordering. Instead, they simply show the pages in an intelligent alphabetical sequence.

Content re-use

Content re-use is alive and well in wikis. Confluence provides the following macros:

- `{excerpt}` – Define a re-usable chunk.
- `{excerpt-include}` – Copy the re-usable chunk into another page.
- `{include}` – Copy the entire contents of one page into another page.

You can re-use content within the same space or across different spaces.

A plugin is an independent piece of software that you can add to your wiki, to extend the wiki's core functionality. It is similar to an add-on for your browser. Confluence plugins may be developed by Atlassian or by third parties.

Release management

Let's assume that your product goes through a regular release cycle, and that you need to retain separate documentation for each major version of the product. Can you do that on a wiki?

Yes, you can. We use spaces as our version-control mechanism. Here’s an overview of the process we follow:

- Leading up to release date, we work with ‘hidden drafts’ in the documentation space. For new features, we create new pages with restricted permissions as discussed earlier. If we need to update existing pages, we create a hidden copy of the page and apply the updates to the copy.
- We follow the usual draft and review procedure.

When release date is near, we copy the documentation space to create a snapshot of the current release as an archive. (We use the Copy Space plugin¹¹)

- On release date, we rebrand the main documentation space to reflect the new release number. We unhide all the new pages and copy the content of the updated pages to the proper pages, then delete the copies.
- We then export the new release to PDF, HTML and XML, for those customers who prefer offline versions of the documentation.

Figure 8 shows an extract from the dashboard of our documentation wiki¹², listing the spaces for different versions of the Crowd documentation. (Crowd is one of our products.) Each space holds the documentation for a specific major release of Crowd.

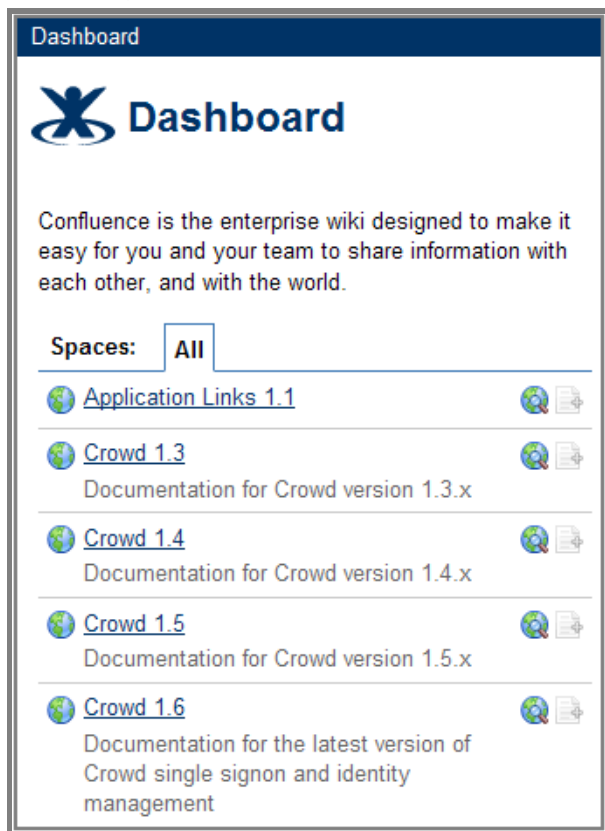


Figure 8: Documentation spaces for each version of Crowd

Agile development

The first part of this article has described how we use Confluence in an extremely agile environment. More and more technical communicators are finding themselves in such an environment and discovering that they need different tools to suit the new way of working. A wiki is a good candidate for such a tool.

Following are the four main tenets of the agile methodology. I’ll go through them and explain how a wiki may help to support each tenet, as a technical documentation tool.

From the Agile Manifesto¹³:

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it.

Through this work we have come to value:

- **Individuals and interactions** over processes and tools
- **Working software** over comprehensive documentation
- **Customer collaboration** over contract negotiation
- **Responding to change** over following a plan

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.

Let’s tackle the bullet points one by one. How does a wiki promote dealing with *individuals and interactions*?

- A wiki acts as an efficient hub for document creation, review and maintenance. Particularly where you have people working in different time zones, this greatly speeds up the process and reduces the potential for mistakes.
- Most wikis include a ‘social’ aspect. You have a user profile, with a picture, a stream of your recent activities and those of your colleagues, and other information about your position in the company. This helps to engage your readers in the documentation and give them a sense of ownership and collaboration.
- The latest editions of wikis include ‘status updates’, similar to Twitter. This contributes to the sense of immediacy and relevance. The documentation is part of the whole social environment. People spend time there.
- Wikis put people first. For example, each page shows the author and the person who made the last update. In general, this encourages people to contribute to your documentation.

How does a wiki promote *working software over comprehensive documentation*? Luckily, we can declare this point off topic, because it is not about using a wiki for documentation. You may find some answers in some blog posts^{14 15} about the agile technical communicator.

How does a wiki promote *customer collaboration*?

- Customers can comment on the documentation pages.
- Selected customers (community authors) can even update the pages.
- Customers can subscribe to RSS feeds or watches, to monitor the documentation themselves. This gives them the power to decide what they need to know and when.

How does a wiki help us to *respond to change*?

- Developers are fond of wikis (a wiki is still geeky enough) and will contribute to the documentation during each iteration, thus speeding up the process of document development and review.
- The publication workflow is simple and fast.
- Using a wiki reduces the bottlenecks that can occur with strict publication workflow or scarcity of technical communicators.

- Technical communicators monitor the updates and comments via RSS feeds or page watches. They know as soon as something changes in the documentation and can intervene if necessary.

In closing

I hope this article has given you a good feel about the tools available on a wiki, and the ways you can bend its functionality to do what you want.

One excellent thing about wikis is that their developers are usually open to suggestions for new or improved features.

Many wikis are available as free downloads. You can get a free personal licence for Confluence (up to two users), a free non-profit licence or a free 30-day trial.

That gives you the chance to try out a wiki then let the developers know what's missing, from a technical communicator's point of view.

¹ The Atlassian website at <http://www.atlassian.com>

² Sarah's blog at <http://ffeathers.wordpress.com>

³ Approvals Workflow plugin at <http://confluence.atlassian.com/display/CONFEXT/Approvals+Workflow+Plugin>

⁴ Content Publishing plugin at <https://plugins.atlassian.com/plugin/details/143>

⁵ Get your own Confluence wiki at <http://www.atlassian.com/software/confluence>

⁶ Sage RSS reader at <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/77>

⁷ Thunderbird email client at <http://www.mozillamessaging.com/en-US/thunderbird/>

⁸ Example of {toc} macro at <http://confluence.atlassian.com/display/CROWD/Configuring+Caching+for+an+LDAP+Directory>

⁹ Example of {toc} macro showing highlights in release notes at <http://confluence.atlassian.com/display/CROWD/Crowd+2.0+Release+Notes>

¹⁰ Instructions on adding a left-hand navigation bar at <http://confluence.atlassian.com/display/DOC/Adding+a+Navigation+Sidebar>

¹¹ The Copy Space plugin at <https://plugins.atlassian.com/plugin/details/212>

¹² Atlassian's documentation wiki at <http://confluence.atlassian.com>

¹³ Manifesto for Agile Software Development at <http://agilemanifesto.org/>

¹⁴ Blog about the agile technical writer (part 1) at <http://ffeathers.wordpress.com/2008/01/20/the-agile-technical-writer/>

¹⁵ Blog about the agile technical writer (part 2) at <http://ffeathers.wordpress.com/2008/01/26/the-agile-technical-writer-ii/>



Trends in British Technical Communication

by Marian Newell

Marian edits *Communicator*, the quarterly journal of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators. She has been a technical author since 1985, half as an employee on IT projects and half as a freelance with a varied portfolio. She has an MA in Technical Authorship from Sheffield Hallam University.

This article discusses the current status of technical communication in the UK by looking at current developments and possible trends. It is based on my experience of working here and liaising with contributors to *Communicator*, supplemented by a survey of members of the ISTC's online groups (thanks to my 40 respondents) and my recent visit to the Technical Communication UK conference (TCUK).

There are two facets to my topic. The first, *trends*, immediately makes me cautious. In these turbulent financial times, we only have to look back a year or so to see how much the opinions of pundits are worth. Many trends are, I suspect, talked up by organisations with a vested interest in their adoption. Others are exciting but never catch on commercially. The second, *British*, may be irrelevant. I've no reason to think there's anything unique about what we're seeing here, although there are probably some differences in the European experience compared with the Australasian or North American.

Still, I have worked in technical communication for a quarter of a century and always in the UK, so I'm probably as well-placed as most to speculate!

Roles and job titles

Debate about changing how we describe our roles has recurred often throughout my career and the options remain remarkably stable. Titles that some consider new-fangled, such as information developer, have actually been around for decades. The ISTC's policy is to refer to practitioners of technical communication as technical communicators in generic contexts (its membership is strongly biased towards *technical* despite the presence of *scientific* in its name). Within this, we most commonly refer to technical authors and technical illustrators in specific contexts. However, where appropriate, we use a wide range of other titles.

I've often used the term 'content creator', especially if I want to be more generic

My own experience, supporting by web searching, confirms the popular view that those specialising in the writing aspect of the job are more often called technical authors than technical communicators here. I've seen people argue that authors are more skilled than writers but my belief is that the title used has more to do with the origins of the organisation than the skills of the title holder.

In my survey, I asked people for their current title and their preferred title. About half were currently technical authors of varying ranks and most were happy with the title. A few were writers rather than authors, and a few would prefer to be communicators rather than authors. Only one expressed a dislike of the author or writer title. Many of those working for themselves noted that they're free to use whatever title suits the circumstances best, often business-oriented titles such as director, partner or consultant. Several information-based titles were cited: manager, designer, architect and engineer. Department managers were Head of Technical Communications and Manager, Technical Publications Department.

One of my respondents noted that, despite a move from technical communication to information architecture and design: "I still consider myself a writer and technical communicator, just coming at it from a slightly different angle. I think it's interesting that the skills, attitudes and approach I developed as a writer transfer comfortably into a different type of role."

I've often used the term 'content creator', especially if I want to be more generic and include all who contribute content. However, it raises a question of whether we create or publish content. It seems as if many of those involved in technical communication now do more publishing and less creating.

Deliverables and workplaces

I asked in my survey about current workloads. The answers were too diverse to summarise, including the collection, organisation and delivery of varied technical and business information. Many respondents produce both printed and online deliverables, with some using video and some no longer delivering printed manuals.

I initially wondered if this variety was indicative of a trend. When I joined the ISTC in the 1980s, more members seemed to work for long periods on major projects for large organisations, often in the engineering, aerospace and defence sectors. It now seems as if many members work on software products, with others combining a variety of smaller projects as I do. However, at TCUK I talked to many people involved in complex solutions for large organisations, so I think it depends a great deal on the people whom you ask.

One question I didn't think to include in my survey was about the groups in which people work. However, I think I'm safe in saying that the large technical publications department has had its day. When I started work as a technical author, groups of ten or twenty people were far from unusual. I've heard their decline lamented often since and most of my respondents spoke in terms of working for themselves, as sole authors or in departments of two or three people. I think the effect of this change has been to reduce specialisation—many of us are jacks of all trades—and to reduce the training and mentoring given to people joining our profession.

We used to run a member profile in *Communicator* that included questions on the changes that had happened in the last five years and that were expected in the next five years. A recurring theme in the responses was the shift from paper to electronic delivery. Single sourcing was the industry's initial response to the need to do both.

Maintaining two variants seems relatively simple now, when we're faced with more electronic channels, more languages and more product variants, all under the added pressure of shorter product lifecycles. Despite the relatively slow adoption of XML-based publishing, modular content and content management systems, I'd have to put my money on these technologies gaining ground in the future. With fewer technical communication staff struggling to deliver more in most organisations, it's hard to see how we can do it any other way. I know of one ISTC member who has recently taken his company down this route and, although it's a fair-sized company, the technical communication department is small and the strategy is very much to do more with less.

Tools and methods

A complaint often made by technical communicators here is the over-emphasis in recruitment on tick-lists of particular tools. We argue that the core communication skills required remain unchanged and we can learn to use different tools. It was interesting to me, therefore, to see how much more my respondents talked about tools than methods when I asked them about both.

Where respondents described their approach to collecting, organising and delivering information, it was much the same as when I joined the profession. We read the information we're given, use whatever product or service it describes, interview experts (and sometimes representatives of our audience), and then create content that we submit for review before finalising. Several people noticed that their basic approach to the work had remained unchanged, often over as much as 20 years.

The boom years before the latest bust made more tools available to technical communicators. Existing tools were enhanced and new ones were launched, often converging in the process. With that in mind, it's perhaps surprising that several of my respondents reported little change in the tools they use. Nonetheless, many use a wide variety of tools, emphasising how versatile the modern technical communicator needs to be.

Tools from Adobe and Microsoft featured strongly in past and current use, with Adobe's Technical Communication Suite popular for the future. Arbortext, Author-it, Doc-To-Help, ePublisher Pro (WebWorks), Help and Manual, and XMetaL all had their advocates. A range of graphic tools were in use, including Axure, CorelDRAW, Corel Paint Shop Pro, Jing, OmniGraffle, SnagIt, Unigraphics and Wink. One respondent is considering Quark's products. Tools that were mentioned only in past use were Corel Ventura, DemoShield and SmartDraw.

A few respondents had expertise in niche areas, using specialised tools augmented by utilities and macros they'd created themselves. One or two would prefer to use Macs but find they have to use PCs. A notable omission from the responses was MadCap's products, admittedly relatively new but highly regarded.

Methods, for want of a better word, cited by respondents included Information Mapping®, structured and topic-based authoring, markup languages (such as HTML, SGML, XML), controlled languages (such as Simplified English), controlled vocabulary and minimalism. XML

was most often cited as an interest for the future, along with DITA.

There were sessions on most of these topics at TCUK and it's clear many are widely applied. What becomes evident when you attend an event like that is the sheer

scale and complexity of some publishing solutions now being adopted. The keynote speech from Peter Anghelides underlined this: IBM publishes more information than anyone except the US Government.

Topic-based authoring is nothing new. User assistance for software products has been designed that way for years. I think it will become more prevalent because it is a logical approach to information architecture as well as

Peter Anghelides...
IBM publishes more information than
anyone except the US Government.

being well suited to multiple outputs and automated workflows. There's no reason why you can't use it for linear printed documents, even though you don't have to, and the way it requires you to analyse your content is likely to improve the way you structure it.

My overwhelming impression from attending TCUK was how computerised our profession has become, both in the tools used and the topics documented. While I know the world is headed this way, it's not there yet. My clients often have limited resources and expertise to maintain or use publishing solutions. They're not unusual—the vast majority of UK businesses are small- to medium-sized, most employing less than 50 people although together accounting for nearly 60% of the private workforce. The consultancy approach, providing ongoing services and support, creates dependency and overheads that may not always be in a client's best interest. Similarly, some of my audiences have other limitations, whether in their facilities (service engineers in developing countries) or their computer skills (gardeners and caretakers). I'm 47 and, while many people younger than me are at ease with digital media, many people older than me are less so. In our eagerness to converse with those who are connected, we must not forget those who are not.

Generalisation and specialisation

Since the advent of desktop publishing in the 1980s, a movement from specialised skills towards generalised skills seems indisputable. Some of my respondents said they do their own illustration as well as layout, and none of the authors mentioned working with illustrators or indexers. I've worked with an illustrator for one client but recent budgetary constraints have favoured photography over illustration. I've never worked with an indexing specialist, now or in the past, as an employee or as a freelance, so there may have been no change there. Contact with members of the Society of Indexers has suggested to me that their work more typically comes through commercial and academic publishers. I know of several ISTC members who have trained with and joined the Society of Indexers to improve their own skills.

The demand for illustration varies with sector. Instructions for software often contain only screenshots and diagrams, and the weakness of the manufacturing sector in the UK's service-based economy may have contributed to the decline in illustration work. The sophistication of modern design systems that support the whole product life cycle has also had an impact. It has become possible for designers to output drawings that are adequate for documentation, albeit without the refinements that a proficient illustrator could make. One of my respondents referred me to the blog (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/robertpeston/2009/08/>) of Robert Peston, BBC Business Editor, which

likens the varied workload of the modern journalist to the versatility of the 1970s Dutch football team (total football). My respondent said: "This is how my career is progressing – I am becoming a 'total author' and I would encourage all technical authors not only to learn how to use the tools at their disposal but to learn to use them professionally. There will always be a need for people who can do something to a professional standard, because there are increasingly so many people doing it so badly, whether it be writing, illustrating, photographing or web designing."

If content management continues to grow, however, we may see new specialisations emerge. With information architecture, content creation and deliverable design once again being separated—different people can take responsibility for them. For me, one of the saddest losses from departments was the technical editor and yet now I'm seeing suggestions that this role may return, perhaps more relevant to managed content from multiple sources than an author. This may be one of the cycles we see, where change is more circular than progressive. At the ISTC Conference of 2008, Horace Hockley award winner Matthew Ellison gave an entertaining talk about trends in user assistance. He compared its evolution to that of the bicycle, not only highlighting some blind alleys in feature design but also how 'best' is not absolute but relative to your needs—if you want to cycle to the shops, a racing bike probably isn't the best choice.

On the subject of separating the creation of content from its presentation, I noted with interest that one speaker at TCUK thought there was no need to worry about the output format or media used for your information, while another said it was important to preview content on the output device to check its usability, while another from outside our profession expressed surprised that we were even considering delivering information without seeing it in its final form—food for thought there, perhaps.

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Translation is a specialisation that has grown throughout my career and remains strong today. Alternatives such as word-free instructions suit some products, and provide valuable opportunities for illustrators, but they can't fulfil all information requirements. It's difficult to imagine that the demand for translation will decline any time soon, although I wonder if a globalised world will eventually settle on a single language. The use of controlled language makes this more feasible.

Surprisingly, few of my respondents reported direct involvement in translation. This would have been true for me until a few years ago but I have since been acting as the liaison point for one client. That's brought home to me the challenges that arise in translation and the importance of terminology management. As a freelance, working outside an organisation with translators who are also outside the organisation, I find it difficult to impose the degree of control and consistency I would like.

Sophie Hurst of SDL, a provider of translation products and services, has written two articles for *Communicator* over the past year based on surveys about authoring and terminology management. She reported the UK results for us (full results are available at www.sdl.com – registration required). Trends she noted included a move towards XML and a growth in the geographic dispersal of authoring teams, with the latter giving rise to concerns about quality and consistency that the respondents did not have the tools to manage. In both cases, the trends were less pronounced in the UK than the US. That may not be a bad thing for the UK profession, in that new approaches may be tested well in the US before they reach us. There was an awareness of the importance of terminology, its connection to brand and its effect on the whole global content lifecycle, from creation to translation. However, most respondents said they were not managing terminology effectively, if at all.

Fads and fashions

At the ISTC Conference of 2007, Scott Abel gave a keynote speech on TechComm 2.0 (<http://www.slideshare.net/abelsp/techcomm-20-what-you-need-to-know/1>) in which he swept through a plethora of mobile devices and web tools as potential delivery media and techniques. No one would deny that publishing channels are proliferating, or that some can be useful in technical communication, and yet many technical communicators still work in controlled environments that restrict their adoption. As I've said, many of my respondents have seen less change in their tools and methods than one might expect. Most are responding to users and clients who are still focused on the content rather than the means used to deliver it. However, I know from articles written for *Communicator* that people are now using wikis and podcasts for some types of information and this seems set to become more common. The role of user-generated content is growing and I agree with those who say technical communicators will need to focus on more specialised content that the audience cannot, or will not, readily create for itself.

In his closing presentation at TCUK, RJ Jacquez of Adobe focused on the potential of social networks for delivering information and suggested that technical communicators should become 'information facilitators', getting into online conversations and ensuring that users are finding the information that's available. It's clear that interactive media can help us understand audiences and to provide more targeted content, and many technical communicators are enthusiastic about this opportunity. I think it will be most helpful to those writing for mass audiences rather than for specialised ones. I often write for clients' staff, which makes conversation easier.

Larger organisations, especially those that need to translate into several languages, seem more focused on managed, modular content. There is a criticism that such methods respond more to the publisher's needs than the audience's needs. From what I've read in articles from many sources, I believe there's some truth in this. However, it's also true that providing something to everyone who needs it in a language they can read is better than providing carefully crafted information products for a small subset of the people who need them. A meticulous author at one of my clients laboured long and hard on every manual he produced; I'm sure his results were excellent but they were of no help to the users of all the other products that weren't documented through lack of time or budget. That moves us on to...

Quality and productivity

I've mentioned the need to do more with less in the context of tools and methods. At the ISTC Conference of 2005, Bogo Vatovec gave a keynote speech on trends in technical communication

(http://www.istc.org.uk/Events/Conference/Papers/ISTC_Trends.pdf).

One of his points was that we need to be realistic about delivering appropriate levels of quality, rather than striving for perfection. His advocacy of 'good enough' was controversial but I've come around to thinking that he

might be right. In fact, it's more or less how quality was defined 30 years ago when I served an apprenticeship at an MoD quality assurance directorate: fitness for purpose, including commercial considerations.

One of my respondents has found the same: "I have had a few contracts in the past few years where a company has realised that it needs to provide decent documentation but wants to do it as cheaply as possible. Thus my job has been to produce a basic user guide and what they call a maintenance guide for their programmers, so that the programmers can then maintain the document and keep it up to date with their changes."

Bogo Vatovec ...we need to be realistic about delivering appropriate levels of quality, rather than striving for perfection.

Another respondent highlighted the risk that the result may not be good enough: "More and more people and businesses are coming to realise that having poor, or no documentation, does actually cost them more money in the long run than it would to employ or sub-contract a professional technical author to do the job properly. However, straitened financial circumstances cause unpleasant compromises to be made. I think that many organisations would like to use professionals for their documentation needs but simply haven't got the money to do so. Instead, they struggle on with their existing staff (engineers, programmers or marketing people, for example) producing poor quality support materials. They then have to live with the increased support costs and negative end-user reaction. Pity, really."

One change I've noticed that could have a positive effect on quality in the future is the popularity of post-graduate qualifications in technical communication, launched in the UK since I became a technical author. This can only be a good thing for the profession, with the potential to raise both profile and standards. The course itself is only half the story: what I believe is equally important is that we're taking ourselves seriously and obtaining a standard qualification that puts us on a par with others in business. The ISTC has launched its own open learning course and examinations, replacing those dropped by the City & Guilds Institute. This, too, is a step forward for the profession here. One of my respondents said: "I am active in the ISTC and other organisations, and involved in teaching, because I want to improve the recognition and value of technical communication."

Economic and commercial factors

Times are tough here in the UK, as in many places, and I doubt technical communication has been exempt from economic pressures. I checked some job sites and found the number of jobs and contracts were down on 2008, both absolutely and as a proportion of the total. Contract rates had fallen, while salaries had risen only slightly.

One of my respondents said: "I am aware of many self-employed writers who have not had contracts renewed and are finding it tough to gain new ones. The number of job advertisements both permanent and contract has diminished significantly. In addition, the salary offered seems to have dropped, with employers preferring to go for less experience and therefore lower salaries."

The last point correlates with the current demand for technical authors with one to three years' experience noted by a specialist agent in an article I wrote for the Australian bulletin, Words in August 2009 (<http://www.abelard.com.au/words-1-3.pdf>).

We are fortunate to have some good specialist agencies in the UK but, of course, not all work goes through them. One respondent said: "My last contract was direct and,

although it proved difficult at times to negotiate the corporate maze, worked well. I am now using agents and find their lack of knowledge, and their failure to return calls and provide updates, deeply frustrating."

For those of us who work as true freelancers, from our own premises and for concurrent clients, agencies are rarely a source of much work. The specialists use some freelancers to resource their own managed projects but most general agencies handle only full-time contracts.

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On a related theme, one of my respondents said: "I have been trying to get a permanent part-time job or job share and companies seem less open to these

opportunities, as human resources departments see them as expensive and inefficient."

Most of my respondents have been affected by the business climate in one way or another, even if only in reduced budgets, although some are as busy as ever. Many reported redundancies, fewer enquiries, lost clients and delayed projects. One, an employee, said UK staff are voluntarily matching a compulsory four-day week introduced for US staff. Another, a freelance since 1984 who has now taken on part-time employment in another field, said it is 'by far the worst recession I have worked through. One regular client (property-related) closed suddenly leaving a big hole in my workload, and another is definitely cutting down on outside work."

In the midst of all this gloom, one respondent turned a threat into an opportunity: "My position had been under threat for a couple of years. The company had already reduced my pay and was starting to make redundancies. The other author was sacked, leaving me as sole author. I seized the opportunity to change my working conditions and quit, saying I was going freelance and would be pleased to quote for the work if the company wanted to retain my services. I increased my hourly rate and now work from home, so I'm happy. They have one less person as an overhead and have retained my product knowledge and authoring services, so they're happy too."

The picture was less clear when it came to the impact of outsourcing or offshoring. Of those affected, as many had gained work through these routes as had lost it. One of those who'd benefited from offshoring said: "I think in the long term outsourcing and offshoring could really hit some technical authors hard. Many have skills that are not as unique as they think they are. Many are not as good as they think they are. Why pay £30K a year plus all the associated costs when a freelance in India (or several other countries) will do it for US \$5 an hour?"

Another respondent alluded to downward pressure on remuneration, suggesting contract rates might have fallen by 50% and senior posts might be paying the same as junior posts did 15 years ago.

I'm inclined to agree with these comments, even though early fears about offshoring have yet to become reality.

British people are eager to buy cheap goods made in places that pay low wages but expect high salaries here, a situation that seems unsustainable in the long term. Examples of failed attempts to offshore are often cited but I believe it's worth noting the progress that IT service providers in India have made over a short period: you can now procure effective, competitive services from companies with high levels of process maturity.

Another respondent, who has diversified from technical writing into knowledge management in its widest sense, said: "The freelance work I do now is geared towards this enterprise-wide way of capturing, processing and disseminating information and hopefully creating knowledge. As an aside, I think this is where professional technical communicators need to aim for. I personally sense that salaries in the narrow technical writing field are now less than what I was earning ten years ago and, with Google now often being my first point of call rather than a manual or help file, I wonder if traditional technical writing, as a discrete profession, is in terminal decline. And I really do think technical communicators need to get over the quest for perfect grammar. As a user (rather than producer) of information, I really don't care so long as the content is designed in a way that I can use it: think macro design not micro design."

As Editor of *Communicator*, I have to admit to seeing work of a poor standard from some experienced technical communicators. While not a purist, I do believe that someone claiming to be an author (which not all our contributors do, of course) should be able to write well. However, I doubt that standards of written English are falling: I've seen that complaint in periodicals so old that today's complainers would have belonged to the generations criticised by their predecessors. More to the point, though, it's not just a question of grammar. When I see articles that are inaccurate, incomplete and muddled, I have to wonder what kind of deliverables their writers are producing in the workplace.

The ISTC was as concerned as any organisation by the threat of falling revenues, both from current activities and from lower returns on investments. It's been fortunate in that membership has held steady and both affiliates and advertisers have maintained their support. You can imagine the apprehension about launching the Technical Communication UK conference in such a climate but it was a great success, with positive feedback coming in on comment forms, online groups and social networks.

Conclusion

When you ask around, there does seem to be a certain amount of struggling going on throughout the profession. I think this is not unlike the stress of modern living, about

which one often hears complaints in wider contexts. People feel under pressure to do more for less, with aspects of their former roles being automated to cut costs. I'm not sure whether that's a genuine trend or just the way people always feel. I've read accounts from the late nineteenth century that make me suspect the latter.

Certain pressures are clearly new. Until about 1980, both authors and illustrators would probably work with pen and paper, needing to know little about graphic design, typography, reproduction or anything else that came after it. A technical communicator today may well have to learn a new tool or technique every year or two, making it no mean feat to keep skills current. Similarly before the world became so small, many would work in their own language with no thought of controlled language, translation or other localisation issues.

I wonder if some pressures arise more from greater knowledge than lower standards. We're more aware of inconsistencies between projects, products, offices and countries but is it that the inconsistencies are new or just that we know about them now? Similarly, we're more aware of the times that we fail our audiences but might

that be because we're doing more to measure the success of our outputs and to elicit user feedback? That may be a pressure we should get used to now, as it seems likely that having more conversations with

our audiences will give us longer to-do lists in our work.

I don't believe there's been a major change in what we're trying to do or our commitment to do it as well as we can. I do think that more choice in *how* we create and deliver content means more effort in learning about the options and implementing the selected ones. We have to be more flexible and we won't always have the jobs we expected. That can be hard: those who were happy to be technical authors or illustrators (emphasis on *author* or *illustrator*) may feel uneasy, or dissatisfied, in other roles. In that sense, technical communication is like any other occupation and must change with the times.

However, I doubt things change as fast as some would have us believe. There are fresh opportunities for those who want to use new channels to reach people, just as there were in the 1980s and 1990s for those who wanted to become involved in design and typography, and that's great. Equally, there's still work for those who want to create and deliver content in more conventional ways. It seems reasonable to assume that some of the new will eventually displace some of the old, so we must keep informed if we're to make career decisions appropriate to our skills, knowledge, interests and aspirations. In an age that attaches such a premium to choice, perhaps we're lucky to have so many options open to us.

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