Effective technical communication

Communicating effectively enables you to:

Gain credibility

- Have influence over key stakeholders
- Build trust with colleagues
- Advance in your career

Keep the customer happy

- Transparent communication contributes to customer "goodwill", which is an intangible asset
- Brand loyalty

Contribute to the bottom line

- Clear communication makes your projects have more impact
- Decrease calls to technical support

Examples of poor communication

Examples of poor communication (from various journalists)

Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
Do they taste like chicken?

Panda Mating Fails: Veterinarian Takes Over
Rather him than me.

Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
There's something stronger than duct tape?

Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
Sounds like a chainsaw massacre

(from http://richarddetrich.com)

How do we communicate effectively?

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#1: Know your audience

- Take the time to analyze who your audience is

- Determine what their needs are

#2: Have a clear message you want to communicate and state this up front

Use the "active voice"

- Active: "Click the XX icon to view your results

- Passive: (don't use)
  When the XX icon is clicked, the results are displayed

Audience types

Audience types

Administrator
wants to know about time & resources -> focus on costs & benefits (also known as "the bottom line").

Expert
wants detailed information, including theories, background, and research -> they want an in-depth understanding of things.

Technician
wants procedures & schematics, information on how to fix things, and practical info on the product's details.

Layperson
wants information (could be procedural or explanatory) that helps them accomplish their tasks / goals. Usually they need analogies, illustrations, or comparisons to help them make sense of new things.

Information architecture

Information architecture

The most important information goes first

Use a logical flow
need a structure and a pattern (consistency), or your content will become convoluted and hard-to-understand

Structure examples:

- Chronological

- Cause and effect

- Process

- Classification

- Compare and contrast

Style

Style

Use a style guide and ensure that you stick to it

Use precise words
Avoid "buzz" words and pretentious words.

Avoid the use of acronyms. If your goal is to communicate, then state your case using simple, concise English.

Use "click" *not* "press" when referring to selecting objects in software. The word "press" is appropriate for pressing a key on the keyboard. Use "tap" when referring to instructions on a mobile device.

Correct spelling is important
If you misspell words, it's one of the quickest ways to lose credibility. The thought is "if the spelling is wrong, how accurate is the content itself?"

Use the appropriate level of complexity

"the more complex the writing, the less respect the readers had of the writer" Society of Technical Communication Intercom Article – Feb 2014

Style continued…

Write clear, plain sentences
Put the subject of the sentence at the beginning of the sentence. Don't use nominalizations (that is, making verbs into nouns). For example, you can use decontaminate as a verb, which results in a clear sentence. Or, you can use decontamination as a noun, which results in a weaker sentence.

Use punctuation
Having run-on sentences will annoy your audience and obscure your message. Don't make it hard on the reader to understand what you're trying to say.

Bullets
Don't overwhelm your audience with bulleted items. Use a maximum of 9 bullets, and put the items in some sort of order, so that it's easier for your audience to remember (not a random list of elements).

White space is your friend

Don't jam everything together… this becomes a barrier to readability

Style continued…

Anthropomorphism
don't give human characteristics to software applications. For example, application X doesn't "allow" you to do something. Instead, reword the sentence. For instance, you can do X by clicking the XX icon.

Verbs vs. nouns
Start up your computer vs. The startup process is time-consuming.

Capitalization
All caps vs title case vs sentence case vs lowercase

Examples:

This is Title Case

This is sentence case

Style continued…

Word use examples

"use" – less pretentious than utilize

Dialog box, not dialog, nor dialogue box

Mockups, not mocking

Effective communication is the key to your success!

By applying the principles in this presentation, your materials will have a greater impact, and your circle of influence will increase.

Summary

References

Intercom articles published by the Society of Technical Communication (STC)

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Good luck!