

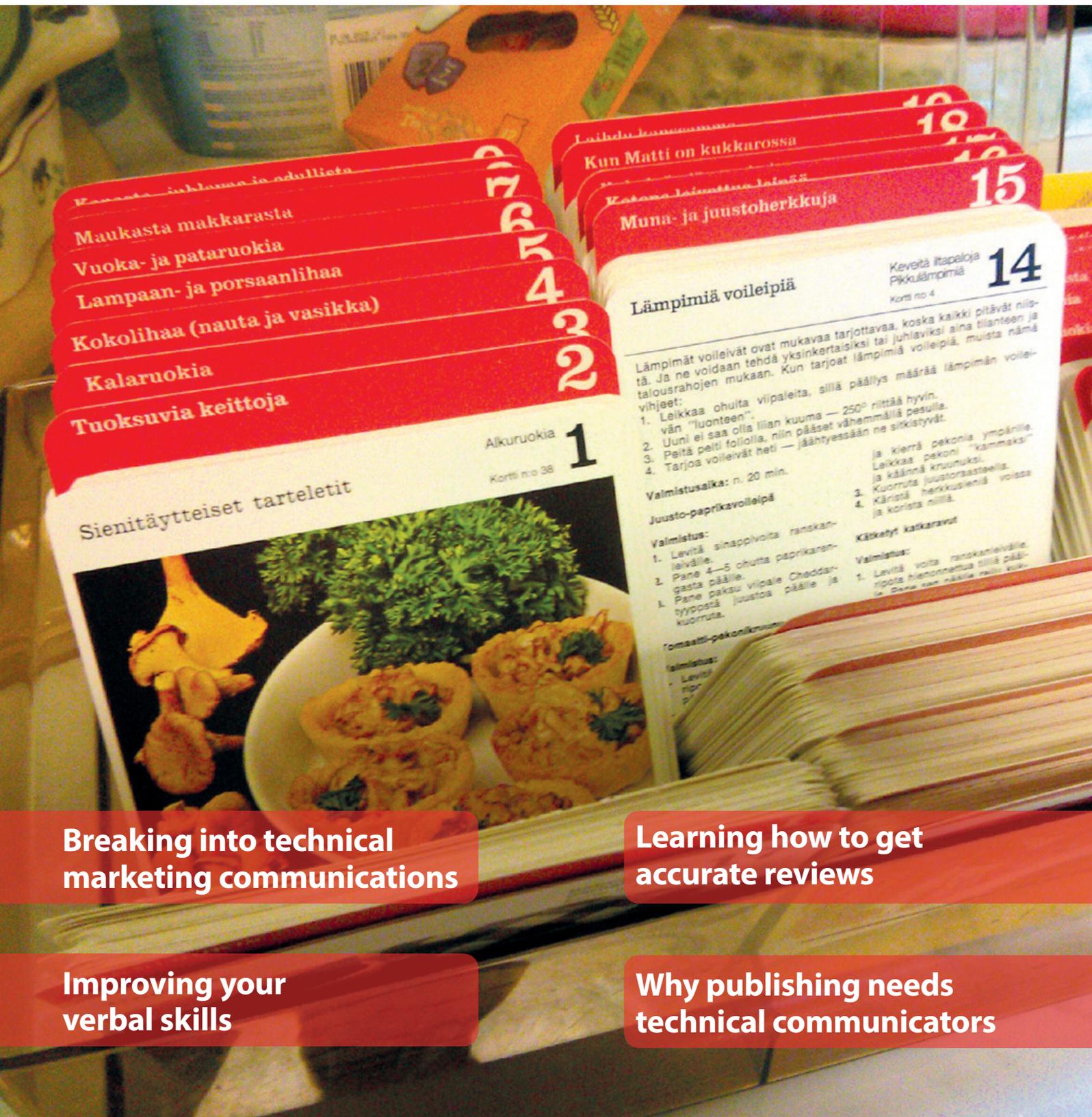
Where are technical communicators?

Finding the location of your colleagues



Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Autumn 2014



Breaking into technical marketing communications

Learning how to get accurate reviews

Improving your verbal skills

Why publishing needs technical communicators

Training in verbal skills

Jean-Paul Bardez looks at how you can improve your verbal communication skills.

Technical communicators fulfil information needs that were never expressed, supplying data which was never written before.

The best data management system will never provide technical communicators with this information, it has to be collected in verbal form. Neither will the system manage all aspects of a documentation project, solve technical issues, suggest product improvements after documentation has been tested by clients, etc. What did you say? You don't test? I see... So you need to convince your boss this validation step is required; to verbally discuss documentation with your clients. For several years now, I have been teaching these verbal skills, which I find central to our roles as technical communicators. This article provides a few examples of the exercises I use.

Producing good documents requires oral proficiency, a skill that can help in some typical situations such as: persuading in meetings, informal discussions in the elevator, a chat during a coffee break or lunch, making suggestions for alternatives in follow up meetings, collecting information when interviewing engineers or clients, requesting additional information or raising issues when discussing with the project leader, on the phone, through videoconference, etc. If we want to produce good quality output, we must speak up in a variety of situations, and clarify facts with engineers several times during each project.

Address people fluently

As a first exercise, I ask students to make a three minute presentation of a concept to special recipients (elderly, blind people, telepathic extraterrestrials, etc.) with precise quality criteria, and a shift in the concept to explain, this enables a playful approach. It can lead to self-assessment which always comes as a surprise since the outcome is... good marks. And how could it be different? The criteria for self-assessment is known, we all tend to respect the special recipients without making a special effort.

This exercise has several purposes:

- getting students to talk in a situation,
- building up self-confidence by proving to students that they are able to communicate verbally,
- establishing a group atmosphere based on observation,
- putting the emphasis on oral communication,
- making students use notes as a help for verbal performance and recording what they hear,

- making students understand how easy it is to communicate once the communication goal has been clearly defined, and
- finally, making a first approach regarding the topic of verbal skills.

Take full advantage of the richness of the word of mouth

Words fly away, writings remain. We don't organise debates for the sake of verbal jousting. Debriefing the first assignment gives us the opportunity for a first verbal group exercise, and this must be given special care. Several students are therefore asked to report on specific aspects of the group talks, like "What differs from a school approach?", "What helps change?", "What is unusual?", etc. It is about building on the density of oral information by using « filters » and taking notes. At the end of the debate, we have a round table discussion, to enable each participant to speak and express what they found useful.

This feedback enables me to fine tune the workshop, and it also places the students in a position where they act on their own training, and at the same time get used to discussing as a regular activity.

Personally, I take many notes on what I hear in an interview context, be it formal or in front of the coffee vending machine. The transition from speech frees my memory and prepares information for later use when I will need it for writing. During group discussions, I always ask several students to take notes so that they are able to later produce quick verbal feedback. This way, we go back and forth between speech and text and students get accustomed to be actively listening, and to giving a greater value to the unwritten information.

Provide evidence

We, as technical communicators, are often asked to provide evidence that our role needs to cross enterprise boundaries, and that just rewriting functional specifications will not suffice. The first document to create is a user satisfaction survey. Even if we have a sense for spotting weaknesses in a document, the only valid proof is customer feedback. So I train my students to set up user satisfaction surveys.

Quickly adjust processes based on talking

The best way to make clothes fit is to adjust them. The same concept applies to writing. In order to design surveys, students interview users, to identify problematic areas. Asking

users questions and validating the survey with them enables us to quickly set up a relevant survey. Online tools ease the production of the survey and process the results very easily. The students see the gap between user information needs and what they have been provided with. Reflecting on this experience is part of the process and students get accustomed to take some distance with the written document. Reliable and relevant information exists, but technical communicators need to learn how to collect it.

Be fluent

One of the first assignments we practise is to ask trainees to test a user noting particularly how they use a function of a smart phone. In order to do that, students rehearse a scenario telling people taking part in the test that it is not they who are being tested but the user instructions and we're interested in what the customers don't understand. They learn and rehearse this scenario like a play, because it must be identical for everyone tested, to provide homogeneous test conditions, and so that students get into the habit of rehearsing important verbal dialogues. We ask testers to speak aloud what they think. Students write down their customer feedback to process it later and improve their user instructions.

It is the first contact students have with an iterative approach to documentation. It is also the first opportunity to abandon their natural resistance to edit text they have written, if they understand that the real value they add is not to produce a text (which will never compete for any literature prize), but to make it comply with the users' information needs.

Steering meetings using minutes writing

Monitoring meetings? Usually, nobody volunteers to write meeting minutes. The person writing them needs to ask questions to be able to report on the decisions. Discuss documentation requirements with engineers, sales people and management to discover the problematic areas which are likely to negatively impact on the documentation process. Asking questions and rephrasing what has been said often makes the project move forward.

Get confident with technical communication basics and convince

In order to become an expert, you need to know about the profession history, and the available tools. Rather than lecturing on technical communication, I prefer having students work in small groups to synthesize documents on our profession or on tools, before presenting it in verbal form to their fellow students. This way, we produce once more "spoken instructions to explain", I can monitor what students really understand of the major issues on technical

communication, and we can then discuss them in order for students to acquire substantive arguments and have them readily available for future discussions.

Train to convince

Convincing others is an art which requires you to consider the other party's position. You only convince others if you are convinced yourself of the position you are defending, and if you can give concrete examples. Since we tested the documentation of a smart phone function, we play "we must test our documentation" scenario and make video recordings, which we view to find improvement paths. This approach is very similar to the ones used to train sales people.

Other verbal tools

The spoken word offers many more possibilities. I suggest students read aloud their written production, to detect improper language use, lack of fluidity and repetitions. I also advise them to read their text starting from the last paragraph, in order to better spot spelling mistakes which we see better when the text we are reading does not make much sense (as is the case when we reverse read it).

For all these reasons...

Verbal proficiency of the students, their ability to rephrase on the fly, to find a sense to the product they are documenting, to keep in mind the documentation target and to question, convince, also to accept their production to be challenged by their recipients, all these are undisputable assets for future technical communicators, and they must be trained in them. Of course our trade also requires written proficiency and mastering information technology tools, but to my mind, writing ability and computer literacy are a long way from being enough to make a good technical communicator. **C**



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