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Programme

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IEEE
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United Kingdom



The Netherlands



Germany

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Issues in training people in technical writing in France

Jean-Paul Bardez



Technical writing in France

There is no means to know how many "French" technical writers make their living of this activity in France (I say "French" on purpose, as quite many English speaking technical writers work in France). One to three hundred people seems to be a realistic range, though the higher figure is probably much too high.

In France, and probably in other countries as well, most people believe technical writing is easy. The underlying statements are that "everyone can write" (because we learned it at school) and that "someone knowing about a technical matter can write about it" (as he knows what he is talking about). Unfortunately, even at higher education levels, people cannot write (at least, in the manner required for technical communication) and technical specialists are not always capable of choosing the kind of information users need. The result of this is that we are still too often confronted with documentation that is badly written, ill conceived and in the end, useless to its purpose. This is why training courses in technical writing are so important.

Available trainings

Trainings in technical writing are only now beginning to be found in France in the public and private higher education systems. I started teaching two years ago in one of these courses. It was also the first year for this training. It takes place at Saint Denis University in the North of "Greater Paris" and is designed for 20 people

Translation and Technical Writing, Fontenay-sous-Bois, France. President of CRT (Conseil des Redacteurs Techniques)

Address:

5, Villa des Carrières
94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois
France

tel.: (1) 48 75 66 33

Fax: (1) 48 75 65 66

adr. Internet: 100423.1635@Compuserve.com

who are out of work and look for a new career. During this course, the students (aged between 20 and 55) are being paid from their former employer, the French Unemployment Office or the Paris Region. The required level is a University degree and a good knowledge of English. The title of the course is "Technical writing and translating in informatics and electronics".

This one year training is divided in two parts. October to February is dedicated to theoretical and practical aspects at University (600 hours). The topics include translation in French and in English, basic information in electronics and informatics, practical exercises on the twelve computers (PC 386 DX40), terminology and technical writing (5 hours a week in two sessions with two different teachers). From March to April, the course continues in a two months practical training in a company. The students write subsequently a report on their experience. They are evaluated on this written exercise and on the three marked papers they wrote during the academic part of the course.

Practice of a technical writing training

Teaching technical writing in a country where there is no tradition of it (at least in the modern industrial sense of the term "technical writing") corresponds to an effort of converting practices into a more structured body of concepts and exercises. I was trained as a technical translator in a school where practice in small groups of students is the core of the training. From the beginning, I also wanted to emphasise practice in teaching technical writing, as I strongly believe that learning something consists of trying to do it and of evaluating the things that went wrong, as to improve the next time. Making a lot of reviewing work for my students, I came to make the distinction between three issues which I am trying to deal with: skills, know-how and basic knowledge.

Skills

Learning skills is quite easy (mastering the diverse aspects of a Text Processor, learning rules of typography, understanding the diverse types of documents, learning various tips, etc.). All you need is method, to put these notions into practice in a systematic manner.

Still, when some people use a computer for the first time, they are puzzled by the keyboard and often lost with the various possibilities a graphical interface offers them. On the business side of the training, learning how to write a proposal or an invoice as a free-lance technical writer requires knowledge of the basic circuits within a company. It also leads to evaluating the cash flow requirements for a complete tax year and to the management of orders, overload, outsourcing, larger projects, payment delays, legal action, etc.

Know-how

Learning a know-how has something to do with your ability to adopt a certain state of mind. Technical writers have to be able to listen to the people he interviews, to ask questions, to understand the final user's needs, to propose global solutions and to produce them. This is, of course, the main body of the training.

I divide my two and a half hours class in two parts: half an hour for theory and answering questions and two hours practice and personalised advice. We learn the various aspects of a technical document till December and the students work in groups of two to four people, to obtain faster results. Then they have to write a twenty pages user's manual on an easy software (like the Terminal application in Windows), including an index and a glossary. With the other teacher, we discuss each table of contents before they start writing, then we review the first version of their work and mark the final one according to useability criteria.

The main problem, still unsolved, is to put the students in a situation where they have to gain the information from people who do not always have time to do it or who do not understand the kind of information that is required. Only if we succeeded in simulating this kind of situation could we be sure we did not help them too much in choosing the "relevant" informations. Also, due to the lack of time, the know-how of the technical writer as a project manager can only be seen from a theoretical point of view.

Basic knowledge

To make them feel the thrill and difficulties of technical writing, after a very short definition of what is technical writing, the first exercise is always something seemingly simple and based on the everyday life of the students, like writing the description of how to get to University using the public transport or how to add two figures using a pocket calculator.

The next step is then to see together what went wrong. Only what went wrong is really interesting at this stage and we build a list of common mistakes, a kind of check list of all the things to look for before delivering a text to a customer. To me, it is more important to have this first text from my students than to know everything about their previous professional life.

I find it often necessary to go back to explain more basic things like how to build a table of contents or how to sort information according to their respective weight or more simply, how to be aware that the words someone is saying are the exact information you need to bring to the front of the documentation.

The first year, I had noticed that hardly anyone was capable of building the table of contents of what they wanted to write. At the end of that year, they could make a standard backbone like: Introduction, Table of contents, Configuration, installation and parameter entry, Common operations, Less common operations, Even less common operations, Index, which is fine but does not fit to every product. I decided to start with this the second year. In fact, all know-hows of the technical writer (which we divide into 6 in our charter of CRT) are easy to understand and a bit more difficult to get across. An open hearth operation is quite easy... to understand, and so are the techniques used in technical documentation. But nothing replaces practice.

As for basic knowledge, what one can do in a one year training depends highly on the students motivation. It can be divided into two classes. The first one is language proficiency in French, as producing documentation requires people who master their own language enough to be able to improve its quality or find a system for avoiding mistakes. The second one is a Reader's Digest kind of culture in technical matters, because showing interest in technical matters is the basic condition for producing sensible and useful technical documents.

If the people are willing to improve their French, they understand easily how they can do it by using the tools that are readily available or easy to obtain (speller, personal list of common mistakes, etc.). If they are open to the technical world we live in, they also soon find ways to understand apparently very technical matters without being rebuked by the first wave of new terminology. In these two domains however, we can do little but encourage and try to convince.

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I hope this splitting of the contents of a technical writing training in three classes will be an incentive and stimulate many questions in November. I am looking forward to meeting people with various levels of experience, different ideas on education and diverse industrial needs in their country. Maybe in the end we could come to a more precise classification of what basically... makes technical writer be a profession.