The beginning

■ This issue of *Words* carries a UK flavour. Two Australian expatriates working in the UK, Dan Smith and Kate Macumber, each provide a sketch of what it is like working as a technical writer in the UK.

Continuing the UK theme, Marian Newell describes the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC). Many of us have heard of the STC and the ASTC and not realised that the UK has a similar professional body that looks after the interests of technical writers (called *technical authors* in the UK). That body, ISTC, is relatively inexpensive to join and publishes a monthly and a quarterly journal. The monthly journal is available free of charge from the Institute's website.

■ The passive voice has lost friends over the years, with language handbooks, Plain English practitioners and standards organisations all insisting that active voice is best. This issue of *Words* looks at some of the arguments put forward for preferring the active voice, and finds many to be lacking. The predominately passive writing of academia and science can be dull and sometimes ambiguous. But that is no reason to swing entirely in the opposite direction. The passive voice does have a legitimate place in all forms of writing—including technical writing—and shunning it entirely can lead to bloated and poorly focussed writing.

■ What's in a name? For technical writers, plenty, it seems. The profession, and many of its practitioners, have come up with various names over the years: *technical communicator*, *content provider*, *end-user assistance professional*, *information designer*, *documentation developer*, *documenter*, and so on. The reasons often given for abandoning our longstanding name, *technical writing*—that we do more than writing, and that some of us don't do any writing at all—are unconvincing. But that's no reason why we shouldn't seek a name that more neatly captures the purpose or goal of technical writing. To that end, this issue of *Words* introduces a survey designed to gather the thoughts of practising technical writers on what we should call ourselves.

Geoffrey Marnell

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Contracting in the UK

Dan Smith

When I started as a technical writer in Australia in 1990, the industry seemed young. Back then, my contemporaries and I believed that conscientious, professional writers using best-practice technical writing methods could change the world. Our high-quality documentation would be appreciated by users, increase job satisfaction and reduce stress. We were confident that, if only companies would bother to measure, we could demonstrate that quality documentation saved money by reducing support costs and increasing productivity. We believed that, with the advances in delivery options and in useability research, we were at the dawn of a brave new world.

I have to say that, for the European market at least, the dream has not materialised. I have never encountered writing standards here as high as those I saw in Australia. I know of a couple of universities in the UK that offer degrees or diplomas in technical writing, but graduates find it difficult to get work in the high-tech end of the market where I work. I have only encountered three, and I have to say I wasn't impressed with their skill levels. One, a recent graduate, had never heard of, and had no understanding of, the concept of styles. Another graduate, whom I had the misfortune of having as a manager, involved me in a long debate where I had to defend my plan for a task-based structure for a user manual, and to use active topic headings.

At the high-tech end of the market, a large proportion of writers are ex-programmers, or

technical staff who have fallen into writing. Many companies where I have worked don't even have a peer-review program. This contrasts with my experience in Australia, where one of the first things I learned was the value of peer reviews. Typically I find here that writers are defensive of their work, and don't appreciate peer reviews. User documentation standards here are often no higher than the level that basic obligation requires. The saying "When all else fails, read the manual" really means when *all* else fails.

I have been contracting for most of the eight years that I have been here, and was lucky to have been able to organise a contract from Australia before I arrived in 1991. Lucky, because I found out when my first contract ended that there were certainly no advantages in being Australian for a technical writer in the UK market. I got the impression that, if it wasn't for my 6 months UK experience, I wouldn't have been considered for interviews. In all my time here, I have never met another Australian technical writer. That could be a coincidence, but there is a mistrust of non-native English speakers in the market here. Unfortunately, Australians fall into that category, along with Americans.

Having said that, once you have a foot in the door, the market here is a smorgasbord of appealing jobs. That might change, however, with the current economic climate. A down-side with contracting here is that the UK is like a large city, with London at the centre and the regional cities akin to suburbs. For a contractor, this can lead to long commutes, and some contractors stay in a bed-and-breakfast near their workplaces during the week. But if you base yourself somewhere just west of London, you can be lucky. Ironically, if you like living in the country, a rural lifestyle here is easy to arrange, and yet you are never far from the amenities that civilisation provides.

Despite the down-sides to the UK market, the overriding advantage to an Australian technical writer working in the UK is that it certainly broadens your experience. There are possibly more opportunities for involvement in projects where you write for large user audiences, and are required to organise large quantities of information. You are more likely to encounter leading-edge technologies, such as XML authoring environments, DITA-based structured authoring, and content management systems (CMS). The combination of these three technologies offers exciting possibilities for presenting information in innovative ways, for example, tailored to specific user requirements. I believe that, with advances in the delivery options that these technologies provide, we *are* at the dawn of a brave new world.

Dan Smith

Dan Smith is an expatriate Australian working in the UK. He has many years experience as a technical writer, working with large technology companies in Australia, Italy, France and the UK. (Dan will discuss DITA in the next issue of *Words*.)

In defence of the passive voice

Geoffrey Marnell

In factual writing, plain English is good English. That, on the face of it, is incontrovertible. So it is worthy of attention when The Plain English Foundation in Australia tells us that plain English is writing that prefers the active voice over the passive.[1]

The active voice has indeed become the voice recommended in contemporary language manuals, including those that give advice to technical writers:

"Use the active voice."[2]

"Where possible, documentation developers should use the active voice."[3]

Technical writers seem to have adopted this advice with enthusiasm—perhaps a little too much enthusiasm. For there is a place for the passive voice, even in technical writing.

What is voice?

A common definition of active and passive voice—and one that covers most cases—is one that ties voice to the relationship between *agent* and *subject*. In simple terms, the subject of a sentence is whatever is being singled out for discussion. Pam Peters—Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Macquarie University—describes it as "the person or thing which operates the verb".[4] To find the subject, simply locate the verb in the sentence and make it the focus of a *who* or *what* question:

[1] *The dogs* barked loudly. [verb = *barked*; who or what barked? The dogs.]

[2] *The error* was found by the chief technician. [verb = w*as found*; who or what was found? The error.][5]

In an active sentence, the person or thing that does the action expressed by the verb—that is, the agent—is, in general, the subject of the sentence. In a passive sentence, the person or thing that does the action expressed by the verb is not mentioned in the subject.

Thus example [1] above is an active sentence. The subject is *the dogs*, the verb is *barked* and the person or thing that did the barking (the dogs) happens also to be the subject of the sentence. Example [2] is passive.

The subject is *the error*, the verb is *was found* and the person or thing that did the finding (the chief technician) is not the subject of the sentence.

Where the agent is not mentioned at all, the sentence is in the *agentless passive* voice:

[3] The error was found.

So, where the agent is the subject we have an active sentence, and where the agent is not the subject, or not mentioned at all, we have a passive sentence.

That is the common view of active and passive voice. Linguists, however, have a tighter definition: the passive voice is characterised by a periphrastic verb that combines an auxiliary verb (such as *was*, *were*, *got*, etc.) and a past participle (*found*, *eaten*, *questioned*, etc.). Sentences or clauses without an auxiliary verb and past participle are necessarily active. Thus "The cakes were eaten by the students" is passive and "The students ate the cakes" is active. In most cases, the common view and the linguists' view coincide. However, the linguists' view allows there to be active sentences without agents.

Finally, voice is a property of *verbs*, although we often see *sentences* or *clauses* referred to as active or passive. Where a sentence has only one verb, it is relatively harmless to call the *sentence* active or passive. But a sentence may have more than one verb and they may differ in voice. One might call these sentences of *mixed voice*, yet the presence of a passive verb in a multi-verb sentence is usually sufficient for linguists to call such a sentence a *passive* sentence.

Why worry about passive voice?

For a start, technical writers disposed towards the active voice can limit their worry, for much of what they write—namely, procedural steps—has traditionally been expressed in the active voice. For example:

Enter the ASIC code.

Replace the crossover tube.

On the face of it, such imperatives do not look like active sentences as they have no stated subject. But imperatives such as these have an *implied* subject, namely, the person to whom they are addressed. Thus *Enter the ASIC code* is shorthand for *You can (or should) now enter the ASIC code*, with *you* being the subject. So interpreted, the subject is clearly the agent, and thus such imperatives express the active voice. Moreover, procedural steps, as traditionally expressed, do not have a periphrastic verb comprising an auxiliary and a past participle, and thus linguists would classify them as active.

1. See http://www.plainenglishfoundation.com/ WhatisplainEnglish/tabid/3058/Default.aspx. Viewed 8 June 2009.
2. M Roze, *Technical communication: The practical craft*, Prentice-Hall, 3rd edn, 1997, p. 25.
3. ISO/IEC 26514 (2008): *Systems and software engineering—Requirements for designers and developers of user documentation*.
4. Pam Peters, *The Cambridge guide to Australian English usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK)., 2nd edn, 2007, p. 767.
5. In linguistics, *was found* is called a *periphrastic verb*, one that is made up of an auxiliary verb and a participle: *was* [auxiliary verb] + *found* [past participle of *find*].

But technical writers write more than just commands, so it is worthwhile considering objections that have been raised to the passive voice. The most prominent of these appear to be that the passive voice:

- is inelegant, even ugly
- is not our natural voice
- can lead to ambiguity
- can unintentionally change the focus of a sentence
- is dull and monotonous

What is wrong with the passive voice? Apparently it's downright ugly.

In a recent paper on plain English, Dr Neil James, the executive director of Plain English Foundation in Australia, states that the passive voice can "reduce precision and clarity and increase the demands on readers in comprehending a text".[1] To show the difference between the active and passive, he uses the following example:

> [4] "I think you can fund this project from your existing budget."

This sentence is in the active voice, and James goes on to give what he claims to be the passive equivalent of it:

> [5] "It is suggested that consideration be given to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources."[2]

But sentence [5] is in no way the passive equivalent of [4]. It is a passive sentence and it is an ugly sentence. But its ugliness doesn't stem from its voice: it stems from all the additional bloat and excessive formality that James has added to it, bloat and formality that one doesn't find in the so-called active equivalent. Converting the active sentence to the passive—and not adding the bloat and formality absent in the original—yields the following sentence:

> [6] I think this project can be funded from your existing budget.

Stripped of all its bloat and formality, the true passive equivalent of the original sentence is not as ugly as James makes out.

Moreover, active sentences can be ugly too. Here is an active equivalent of [5], the sentence that James claims is the passive equivalent of [4]:

> [7] I suggest that you give consideration to the implementation of the project out of existing budgetary resources.

The passive voice has no monopoly on tortuous language.

By retaining all the bloat and formality present in passive sentence [5], sentence [7], although active, is no less ugly than sentence [5].

So the passive voice has no monopoly on tortuous language.

Active is our natural voice

John Kirkman claims that the active voice is our natural voice and thus should be our preference.[3] Kirkman calls the subject–verb–object order "normal" in English, but he makes it clear that by *subject* he means the actor or agent. (This is not the same as the grammatical subject discussed on page 3.) Even so, Kirkman is dismissing as *not normal* a good deal of standard English, such as questions and statements beginning with the existential *there*:

> Are you already at home? [question]

> There are five cases already packed. [statement beginning with the existential *there*]

These sentences are normal sentences, despite them not being in the subject–verb–object order.

I suspect that Kirkman is really only claiming that sentences in the active voice are more common than sentences in the passive. And that is true. But how important is that in deciding what voice to adopt? Imperatives are less common than declaratives in English, but that doesn't mean that we should avoid all imperatives. How could we? Thus the predominance of the active voice, on its own, is no good reason for abandoning the passive.

Once upon a time, classical harmony was considered natural, indeed *normal*, music. The major and minor keys of early classical music were considered to define all that was best and natural in music. But how dull it would be if that view was still dominant, if the voice of music that was apparently natural 250 years ago—in the era of Handel and Haydn—was still the voice of music today. Goodbye Debussy, Stravinsky and Pärt; hello monotony.

Passive can lead to ambiguity

It is sometimes argued that the passive voice should be avoided because it leads to ambiguity. Here are some examples from software user guides:

> "A name is given to each price category."

Is this an instruction to the reader to give each price category a name? (If so, the text should read "Enter a name for each price category".) Or is it merely a

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1. N James, "Speketh so pleyne: A historical approach to plain English", *Southern Communicator*, issue 16, February 2009, p. 18.
2. ibid.

3. J Kirkman, *Good style: Writing for science and technology*, Routledge, London, 2nd edn, 2005, p. 51. This is echoed in *Scientific Style and Format*, published by Council of Science Editors (1994, p. 38): "The active is the natural voice, the one in which people usually speak or write …".

statement that the system gives each category a name? (In this case, *automatically* should appear in the sentence.)

Another example:

> "The record may be returned to Data Entry status if it is necessary to correct any errors."

Who or what does the returning? The system? Or the user of the system? By suppressing the agent, these examples leave the reader wondering if they have to do something or whether the system will do it.

All that might be true, but it is not an argument against using passive voice. At most it is an argument against using the *agentless* passive voice. The agent could be added to the predicate of both examples, thus overcoming the ambiguity, while still retaining the passive voice:

> The record may be returned to Data Entry status *by the system* if it is necessary to correct any errors.

This is not a particularly elegant sentence, but at least the ambiguity over the agent has been resolved.

Even so, ambiguity is not a hallmark of the passive voice. Active sentences can be ambiguous too. We might refine the complaint against the agentless passive by saying that agentless passive is often ambiguous *if the reader needs to know who or what does the stated action*. But this is no stronger a criticism of the agentless passive than the criticism that an active sentence is often ambiguous *if it uses a transition word* (that is, a word with two or more strong meanings). An example is:

> Given the defendant's ridicule of the legal profession, the judge is showing remarkable *disinterest*.

This is an active sentence, but is the judge revealing boredom? Or impartiality?

Ambiguity plagues all forms of writing. It is not limited to any particular voice. You do not necessarily rid your writing of ambiguity by shunning the passive voice.

Passive can give the wrong the focus

Kirkman notes that changing from active voice to passive usually changes the focus of a sentence:

> "To make an arbitrary change from *Two thin struts linked the plates to the rig* to *The plates were linked to the rig by two thin struts* is to change the emphasis from the struts to the plates."[1]

In other words, if a writer has a preference for passive writing—as many academics and scientists do—

casting all sentences in the passive voice may well dispose readers to focus on something other than the main thing that the writer wants to single out for discussion.

Well, yes, that's true; but it is no argument against the passive voice. A writer may not want the focus to fall on the *agent* that does something, but on the *thing that the agent does*. In that case, a preference for the *active* voice would have changed the focus from what the writer intended. So Kirkman's criticism of the passive voice can work both ways.

Suppose, for example, that you are writing maintenance instructions for a piece of equipment and have just directed the user to remove a cover-plate. You want them to look inside the now exposed cavity for signs of deterioration, wear and tear, and the like. What you want them to focus on are *effects*, not *causes*—that is, what an agent has *brought about* as opposed to which *agent* it was. In this situation, it is better to write:

> A build up of rust is caused by water penetration.

> Sulphur deposits are caused by the engine running too hot.

These are passive sentences, but they are entirely appropriate. For here the emphasis, the focus, is on signs of deterioration or wear and tear, not their likely cause. That's what we want the reader to look for. And that's why it is best to make an effect the subject of the sentence, not the agent that caused the effect. To write these sentences in the active voice would be to change the intended emphasis or focus:

> Water penetration will have caused a build up of rust.

> An engine that is too hot will have caused sulphur deposits.

The mechanic will probably still need to know the cause of the effects they are looking for—if repairs are necessary—but at this particular point in the procedure we are directing them to look for the problems, not the cause of the problems.

Here is another example:

> The reports will be printed in triplicate.

Your letters

> Ambiguity plagues all forms of writing. It is not limited to any particular voice. You do not necessarily rid your writing of ambiguity by shunning the passive voice.

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1.   Kirkman, op. cit. p. 50.

This is an agentless passive sentence. An equivalent active version is:

> The printer will print the reports in triplicate.

But now the focus is on the printer rather than on the reports, and this is unlikely to be the intention of the writer.

The same considerations apply to the sentence that James used to belittle the passive voice (see page 4). Compare the second clause in sentence [4] with the second clause in sentence [6].

> [4] "… you can fund this project from your existing budget."

> [6] "… this project can be funded from your existing budget."

In [4], the clause is active and the focus is the subject of the clause: *you*. In [6], the clause is passive and the focus is, again, the subject of the clause: *this project*. But it seems unlikely that the writer of [4] would have wanted the focus to be on a person rather than on a project that seems in doubt—*in which case,* pace *James, it is the passive that presents the right focus, not the active*.

To sum up: a policy of always writing in the passive voice might rob a writer of the ability to manipulate focus. But so too does a policy of always writing in the active voice.

To be fair to Kirkman—who raised the issue of focus switching—he does go on to acknowledge that deliberately shifting the focus away from the agent, if handled well, is an invaluable technique:

> "Skilful writers increase the precision with which they convey meaning by deliberately moving from active to passive."[1]

Hang on: always specifying the agent can be unnecessary and hence lead to wordiness

Many technical writers think that for a sentence to be active, the agent must be mentioned. Thus they feel the need to write, say, "FrameMaker closes the **View Options** window" rather than the more economical "The **View Options** window closes".

But a sentence doesn't need to state an agent for it to be in the active voice. "Colour readers will be on sale soon" is an active sentence even though it has no agent. Recall that what characterises the passive voice is an auxiliary verb plus a past participle—*was found*, *were eaten*, *got questioned*, and so on—and no such construction is found in "Colour readers will be on sale soon". Likewise, no such construction is found in "The **View Options** window closes".

It's true that if the agent is in the subject of the sentence, the sentence is active (as explained on page 3). But it doesn't follow that if there is no agent in the subject that the sentence is not active. To argue

Writing Workshop

"IT'S A NICE STORY, MR. FERGUS, BUT WHY DO YOU ALWAYS WRITE IN THE PASSIVE VOICE?"

"I SUPPOSE BECAUSE I'VE BEEN A TAXPAYER ALL MY LIFE."

that would be to fall foul of the fallacy of denying the antecedent. Likewise, if a sentence is in the agentless passive voice, it follows that there is no agent mentioned. But it doesn't then follow that if no agent is mentioned, the sentence must be in the agentless passive voice. That would be an example of the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

Thus technical writers who feel the need to write always in the active voice are not necessarily writing in the passive if they do not mention the agent. Indeed, when the context makes it bleedingly obvious who or what the agent is, writers who feel that they must always include the agent are wasting their own time and that of their readers. If the context makes it clear that, say, FrameMaker will close the **View Options** window, there is simply no need to mention FrameMaker at all. Moreover, you risk the reader sensing that you are treating them paternalistically, and thus risk them adopting an antagonistic attitude towards the text. ("I know that it is Framemaker that will close the **View Options** window when I click **Close**. It's a FrameMaker user guide I'm reading, for goodness sake. So why keep telling me, at every step, that FrameMaker will do this and FrameMaker will do that? Do you think I'm so stupid as to not know that it is the software I am using that can do things without being reminded of that fact all the time?")

Yes, it's true that omitting the agent can, on occasion, lead to ambiguity (as illustrated on page 4). But it doesn't always lead to ambiguity. If I instruct a reader to click **Close**, there is next to no chance that a sane reader will be puzzled by an accompanying sentence that reads "The **View Options** window closes". Will they think "Do I have to close the **View Options** window, or will the system close it for me?". I have already told them that the closing of the window is a result of them clicking **Close**. There is nothing more for them to do. So obviously it is the system that will do the closing, and mentioning the agent is quite unnecessary.

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1. op. cit., p. 50.

As is often the case in prescriptivist language manuals, a potential flaw with a particular construction (such as the ambiguity that can result from a dangling participle) is generalised into a prescription *never* to use constructions of that type ("Never dangle a participle"). A far more sensible approach is to examine each instance in turn and, if there is likelihood of ambiguity or misunderstanding, recast the sentence. Otherwise, leave it as it is (as many dangling participles are entirely innocuous). Likewise, agentless writing may, on occasion, lead to ambiguity. But that doesn't mean that it will always be ambiguous. If it isn't ambiguous, it's as good advice as any to leave it as it is.

Is the passive dull and monotonous?

Writing that is predominantly in the passive can be, and often is, dull and dreary. A preference for the passive has infected much of academic writing, and it has been the predominant style in scientific writing for centuries. And many of us do find academic and scientific writing dull.

> "Because passive verbs play down the agent (or make it invisible) they are not the stuff of lively narrative, [especially] when you want to know who is doing what. Used too often, as in some academic and official styles, they make for dreary reading."[1]

There are problems with the passive voice. But what is bereft of logic is the studious avoidance of the passive voice, as if it were a strain of some linguistic virus that robs our writing of its vigour and vitality.

But is the dullness solely the result of the passive voice? Or must some of the blame be attributed to repetitiveness: the unthinking application of the same style of writing over and over, as if writing to a formula. To keep our readers engaged, we need to do more than just provide them with content that interests them: we also need to provide it in ways that don't cause them to nod off. Variety is the spice of life, and that extends to writing. For instance, we need to vary our sentence lengths and sentence types if we want to keep our readers engaged. Perhaps we need to include *voice* among the attributes we vary from time to time.

Scientific writing might be dull and monotonous to many. But would we invigorate it if every sentence were to be recast in the active voice? I suspect that the materials and methods section in a typical scientific report would be just as dull and monotonous if the agent was always mentioned:

> The experimenters then added nitric acid to the beaker. The experimenters then agitated the beaker for 30 seconds before applying heat to it. The experimenters then noted the specific gravity … The experimenters then … The experimenters then … zzz

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1. Peters, op. cit., p. 602.

So active voice too can be dull and monotonous. *But maybe it is the repetition that induces sleep in the reader, not the choice of voice.*

In conclusion

With the exception of the charge that it can lead to ambiguity, complaints against the passive voice appear to be mostly subjective and personal, and thus more a question of style than substance. And where passive voice can cause ambiguity, the problem is not with the passive voice itself, but with the omission of the agent. And this can be corrected without changing the voice.

I am not suggesting that we should embrace the passive voice as our preferred voice. Far from it. For a start, not every active sentence has a passive equivalent. "Bees collect nectar" does not mean the same as "Nectar is collected by bees". The former is true; the latter only partly true, ignoring the fact that animals other than bees also collect nectar (honey-eater birds, for example). Second, the passive equivalent of some active sentences is unidiomatic. For example, the passive equivalent of "John watched the sun set" is "The setting sun was watched by John". This might pass a grammatical muster, but we simply don't talk or write that way. It would be unconventional and unidiomatic. A reader who encountered it would find its structure odd and distracting. Fine in poetry, perhaps, but a boil on the bum of declarative or indicative writing. Third, the active can be more economical than the passive. So there *are* problems with the passive. But what is bereft of logic is the studious avoidance of the passive voice, as if it were a strain of some linguistic virus that robs our writing of its vigour and vitality.

Seasoned commentators on the ways of effective communication have long acknowledged the usefulness of the passive voice:

> "The passive voice is a valuable feature of the English language, and one widely used in all forms of writing and speaking, not just in science and technology."[2]

> "The passive has a place in any writer's stylistic inventory, in spite of the problems associated with it—its dullness, and the fact that it seems to be habit forming in some institutions or professions. Used occasionally it's a graceful alternative to the active construction, and a useful device for altering the focus … of a sentence."[3]

Finally, is writing that uses passive voice writing in breach of the principles of plain English? Plain

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2. Kirkman, op. cit., p. 49.
3. Peters, op. cit., p. 603.

Language Association International has this to say in its writing guidelines:

> "Use passive voice when appropriate and necessary."[1]

Dr Neil James, the Executive Director of Plain English Foundation in Australia, appears to have a foot in both camps. On the one hand, he counsels against using passives:

> "… the verb 'to be' is not your friend and it will deaden your text. Kill 'to be' *wherever you can* and replace it with something more vigorous."[2]

This tallies with comments James has made elsewhere (see page 4 above). And yet later in *Writing at work* James allows passives in writing, but only as long as they "[do not] outnumber the active verbs".[3] He then goes on to give instances where the passive is acceptable, namely:

- where you do not know who or what the agent is

- where the agent is obvious or unimportant

- where the object rather than the agent is more important

- in order to maintain linguistic flow[4]

Thus some whose writings suggest, in some places, that they are trenchant critics of the passive voice do acknowledge, in other places, that the passive voice has a place in writing. And it does.

And that, your honour, completes the case for the defence.

Geoffrey Marnell

A draft of this paper was reviewed by Stu Allan of Active Voice (Christchurch, New Zealand). The author gratefully acknowledges the corrections and suggestions made by Stu (who was recently awarded first-class honours from the University of Canterbury for a Masters thesis on the passive voice).

Dr Neil James, Executive Director of Plain English Foundation in Australia, also commented a draft of this paper, and provided some important corrections regarding his views on the passive voice. He has also been offered the right of reply to this article.

1. See http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/stephens/intro.html. Viewed 8 June 2009.
2. N James, *Writing at work*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2007, p. 176. Emphasis added.
3. ibid., p. 225.

4. ibid., p. 234–235.

Technical communication in the UK

Marian Newell

In this article, I'll try to give an overall impression of the profession in Britain. As well as my perspective as editor of the national professional journal, I've drawn on the experience of two UK recruitment agencies and an Australian technical author working in the UK. By telling you a little about what the national association offers, what the specialist recruitment agencies expect and how one author made the move, we hope to help those thinking of working in the UK avoid the pitfalls.

The association perspective

The UK association is the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC). Throughout its history, which extends back to 1949, it has always been committed to global collaboration. It was one of the founders of both the international and European groups (INTECOM and TCeurope), and remains an important presence in the profession worldwide.

Having thrived in recent years, the ISTC has launched a variety of initiatives, many available to non-members and some outlined below. In this, it has the support of a professional association management company retained in 2008. For details, visit www.istc.org.uk.

Want to read more about the UK profession?

The ISTC publishes a quarterly printed journal, *Communicator*, and a monthly PDF newsletter, *InfoPlus+*. These are an excellent way for Australians considering a move to find out more about the UK profession. For details, see our advertisement on page 10.

Done some good work yourself?

The ISTC has run competitions since the early 1980s. In 2007, the awards were relaunched with new classes and a national branding to emphasise that they are open to all. The deadline for entries is 30 June each year. A win could be a useful addition to the CV of an Australian technical author coming to the UK. For details, visit www.istc.org.uk/About_istc/ Awards/uk_tech_comm_awards.htm.

Visiting the UK in September 2009?

The ISTC has staged an annual conference since 1992. This year sees it launch Technical Communication UK, which will take place on 22–24 September near Nottingham. The ISTC's partner in this venture is the X-Pubs team (www.x-pubs.com). The full programme and army of big-name sponsors, including Adobe and SDL, underlines what an exciting development this is for the UK profession –

where better to find out more if you happen to be in the UK at the time? For details, visit www.technicalcommunicationuk.com.

Got time to do a little study?

In 2007, the ISTC launched an open learning course aimed at new technical authors. The first exams were held in 2008, replacing those withdrawn by City & Guilds. Open to all, the course could provide a locally recognised qualification to an Australian technical author coming to the UK. For details, visit www.istc.org.uk/Training_education/ istc_course.htm.

The agency perspective

There are several specialist recruitment agencies for technical communicators in the UK and most are ISTC affiliates. The heads of recruitment at two of these agencies contributed to this article:

- Ellis Pratt of Cherryleaf (www.cherryleaf.com)
- Peter Meherne of Plain Words (www.plainwords.co.uk)

What are employers looking for?

Like many others, the UK economy is in recession and this has reduced the work available. Ellis describes the UK market as 'challenging' and Peter agrees that it is definitely down, but thankfully not dead!

Peter says there's still a shortage of good candidates with strong authoring experience. Ellis has found this particularly true of technical authors with one to three years of experience, adding that careers in technical writing are not as well known in the UK as in the US and there are few, if any, undergraduate courses.

Ellis finds that employers are looking for people with good technical writing skills who can complete projects on time, with specific knowledge of industry sectors and authoring tools needed for some roles. Peter thinks there's less interest in newer publishing technologies as employers tighten their belts, but he has seen recent demand for in-depth technical programming skills.

Which sectors are doing best?

Some industries have been hit worse than others by the current economic climate. Peter identifies finance and building as weak sectors, while the public sector and specialist consultancies are faring better. Ellis says high- and bio-tech companies around Cambridge are doing well (there is also a thriving

ISTC area group), as is defence, while IT is suffering although it is still a key sector for technical authors.

Which areas offer the most job opportunities?

Ellis and Peter agree that London and the counties around it offer the most jobs, with many IT companies based in London and the Thames Valley (from the Cotswolds in the west to London in the east), but many telecommunications companies have moved to the north and the south-west. I myself am based in the Thames Valley, about 30 miles west of central London, and find it a productive region for freelancing.

How much do technical authors typically earn?

The average annual salary for a technical author is around £30,000, translating to around £30–35 an hour for a freelance. Rates in London are typically higher and those in the northern half of the UK typically lower. Rates also vary with industry sector.

Are there any obstacles to working in the UK?

You will need a visa that entitles you to work in the UK. As the cost of living is quite high, says Ellis, it can be difficult to manage while looking for work.

As when working in any country not your own, employers may be concerned how long you will stay and reluctant to train you only to see you leave. There are no obstacles specific to Australians — in fact, Ellis says they have a reputation for being hard-working and are generally viewed in a positive light.

A tax regulation, known as IR35, and parts of an EU treaty, known as the social chapter, have caused nearly all agencies to require freelances to work through their own limited companies or through managed service or 'umbrella' companies. For more on freelancing in the UK, visit www.shout99.com and www.pcg.org.uk.

How should visiting technical authors prepare?

You're unlikely to need anything for a UK job application that you wouldn't need in Australia. As Peter says, all the usual rules apply. His reminders are:

- a well-written, well-formatted CV of suitable length (concise and customised for each job)
- good strong work samples
- good and readily available references.

Ellis adds that you should register with the specialist recruitment agencies (most are listed at www.istc.org.uk/Business_affiliates/ba_home.htm),

although this doesn't mean you shouldn't try others too. You also need to be sure that you can be contacted by phone and email, even if you're travelling around.

The member perspective

I could hardly write a piece about Australians working in the UK without seeking input from an ISTC member doing just that. My search led me to Kate Macumber, a technical author working for Innovation Group, based in Hampshire. Kate has worked in the UK for nearly four years, most of that as a technical author, and kindly answered my questions about her experience in the UK. Before coming here, she'd been a technical author in Australia for ten years.

What differences have you noticed?

Firstly, technical writers are usually called technical authors here. The standard of technical writing in the UK is about the same as it is in Australia. I was afraid it would be higher but it's not. There seems to be more authoring work for engineering, science and defence than for software. There also seems to be more paper than online documentation. Since I've been in the UK, I've not done any online writing.

Employers expect you to stay in jobs longer in the UK. It may have changed but before I left Australia, people asked why you hadn't moved if you were in a job for more than two years. It's the opposite in the UK: people ask why I have so many short-term jobs on my CV.

Unlike Australia, the UK has many cities and so there are jobs all around the country. This often seems strange to Australians, who think they'll live and work in London because it's the capital and that is where all of the jobs will be. The cost of living is lower outside London but you'll have less support from other Australians.

You don't always have to fill out tax returns in the UK as you do in Australia. You'll receive a form from HM Revenue & Customs if they require a return from you. The tax year is 6 April to 5 April.

Can there be language difficulties, when we all speak English?

Yes – believe it or not!

Don't underestimate the range of accents. Regional differences are far greater in the UK than in Australia. In my first job on a help desk I couldn't understand what half the callers were saying and so, to their relief and mine, I wasn't asked back after the initial period. It takes a while to tune into both the accents and the speed of speech.

Also words, phrases and slang differ and can easily catch you out. At that same job, callers had to give their account numbers. These started with '000' but I was baffled when they said 'treble 0', as I'd never heard the word 'treble' used in this way. To me, it meant a high-voiced child, a type of recorder or the treble clef. To them, it meant 'triple'.

What's good about working in the UK?

If you're coming to the UK for the experience, the history, the travel opportunities and so forth, then – in my opinion – it's well worth it.

What's bad about working in the UK?

Most of the drawbacks are financial. The average salary of £30,000 ($62,000) doesn't sound too bad until you see on MyCareer.com that the Australian average is $78,500 (about 27% higher). Things in the UK often cost twice what they do in Australia. My expendable income was far higher in Australia than it is in the UK – shopping for Wedgwood is a thing of the past!

For example:

- *Petrol in the UK is around 99p a litre ($2.04) – in Australia, it's $1.23 (59p).*

- *A single room in a shared house in London will cost around £360 ($745.34) a month.*

- *The peak return train fare from my home in Fareham to London (56 miles, 90 km) is £56 ($116). In comparison, a train fare from Ballarat to Melbourne (63 miles, 102 km) is $29.80 (£14.39).*

For more information about the relative costs of living in the UK and Australia, see:

- *www.workgateways.com/working-cost-of-living.html*

- *www.justlanded.com/english/Australia/Australia-Guide/Money/Cost-of-Living*

Although the UK tax rate is lower, you're still better off in Australia. In addition, the Australian Government intends to tax Australians who earn money in other countries for short periods of less than 90 days (www.mpldigital.com/blue-sky/australian-times/261), although this won't apply to those living long-term outside Australia.

Is it easy to get a visa?

Before you leave Australia, be aware that you need either to have a visa that enables you to work in the UK (some visas don't) or to have been born in the EU or of British parents. You will need to apply for most (if not all) visas before you leave Australia: if you come to the UK without a visa and you say you are coming here to work, you are likely to be sent home to apply for a visa.

You can apply for visas at the British High Commission in Canberra (http://ukinaustralia.fco.gov.uk/en). New visas require biometric data, such as fingerprints, to be put onto an identity card. They are not cheap: renewing mine cost £665 ($1,374.66). You also need to show you can support yourself while in the UK, so you will need to provide bank statements or other evidence of savings. When you work in the UK, even though you pay UK tax, you receive no benefits if you can't work for any reason: visas show 'No Recourse to Public Funds'. You will, however, receive free medical treatment through the NHS should you become ill (Australia and the UK have a reciprocal arrangement).

I have a UK Ancestry visa, thanks to my British grandfather. There are other visas, most of which are based on a points system that takes into account your Australian earnings and education. Even with a salary of $84,000 and two degrees, I would not have been eligible.

Companies may be able to sponsor you to work in the UK but I believe they must prove you have skills and knowledge that are not currently available in the UK.

If you want to stay in the UK, you can apply for 'indefinite leave to remain'. Currently, you must prove you have lived and worked in the UK continuously for five years (which might be difficult for a contractor) and you cannot leave the country for more than six months during that time. You also need to sit a test to prove that you can speak English and you have a good understanding of British history and the British way of life. Unfortunately, an earned citizenship scheme being introduced in December 2010 will lengthen the period to up to eight years and, during that time, you will need to prove that you are making efforts to integrate into British life (such as doing community work or running a sports team). For details, see www.boundsgreenhome.com/4817e671-f1b3-b814-cd6f-67673c9e5220.

Universities consider those in the UK on visas as foreign students and charge them far more than residents. A one-year course to update my qualifications would have cost me £8,000 ($16,500). This doesn't apply to private courses.

For more information about UK requirements, visit the UK Border Agency's website at http://ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk.

How about a bank account?

It is very difficult to get a bank account in the UK. I had been warned about this, so I tried to set one up before I left Australia, but, as the UK legislation had just changed to crack down on money laundering, very few banks allowed it. At that time, HSBC required applicants to have held one of its Australian accounts for six months and I didn't have one, so decided to open an account when I got to the UK.

Once in the UK, it took me six months to get a bank account. I couldn't do so until I rented a flat, as I had to prove residence through my name on a utility bill (such as gas or electricity) or on a lease. The bank would have accepted Australian bank statements sent to where I was staying as proof of address but UK post codes are different from Australian ones and would not print on the statements, with the result that the bank rejected them as proof. This sounded picky to me at the time but I didn't realise that UK post codes identify a street or a block of flats, unlike Australian postcodes that cover an entire suburb or town.

Rather comically, I got a job faster than I got a bank account. My employer couldn't transfer my pay into my Australian account so I ended up being paid through a convoluted route involving my father's off-shore account in Jersey!

For more information about UK bank accounts, visit www.workgateways.com/working-uk-banking.html.

What else do you need?

All reputable employers require your national insurance number when you start work. It's like a tax file number. You can find out how to get one at www.direct.gov.uk.

What are your tips for finding work?

First, join the ISTC. This will put you in touch with other technical communicators and give you access to online groups on which jobs and contracts are posted, among other things. You can join as an Associate without any approval process. To join as a Member, you have to provide a CV and possibly additional information (such as work samples).

Find out where suitable jobs are likely to be concentrated. I work in IT and was advised that Reading and Maidenhead (towns in the Thames Valley) had a high concentration of IT firms, so I trawled the Internet for agencies specialising in IT in those areas and sent my CV to them.

One of the biggest advantages you have, initially at least, is that you have no ties. You can work anywhere in the UK, although it's sometimes hard to persuade recruiters of this. One problem is the cost of attending interviews. For those in London, I had not only the return fare of £56 ($116) but also the Tube fare – up to £16.20, depending on zones travelled. Some companies pay travel costs but I never pursued this.

Before looking for work, tailor your CV. Most recruiters won't be aware of even the largest Australian companies, colleges or universities, so explain them. For example, I worked for Telstra and everyone in Australia knows what Telstra is – not so in the UK. I needed to explain that Telstra is like British Telecom, so I said: 'Telstra is Australia's leading telecommunications provider'. Similarly, I studied at Monash University but no one in the UK knows its standard or status, so I said: 'Monash University is the equivalent of a Russell Group university'.

Before tailoring my CV and canvassing areas directly, it was difficult to get interviews. Afterwards, they flooded in. In the last week of my search, I had six (two second interviews) and four job offers – two in London and two in Hampshire.

When considering jobs, take into account travel time and cost as well as the expense of living in a major city like London. UK roads are more congested and, as I've said, public transport is more expensive. You can buy a used car more cheaply than in Australia but cars over three years old must have annual MOT (roadworthiness) tests, which can lead to expensive repairs. You can drive on an Australian licence for 12 months from the date you last entered the UK and you can exchange it for a UK licence, for which you must pay a fee but not sit a test. You can find out more at www.direct.gov.uk.

How has the economic climate affected you?

From what I understand, the recession in the UK is deeper than in Australia. Staffing cuts and freezes abound, and I

know people who have been asked to take voluntary pay cuts. I've been lucky. This is the third company I've worked for in the UK: the first has collapsed and the second is down to a skeleton staff.

Still, although the job market isn't great right now, when times are good I think there are more technical writing opportunities in the UK simply because the market is bigger. Perhaps because of that, it seems technical authors specialise more than in Australia. Employers and agencies tend to favour candidates who've worked in a given sector before and so you sometimes have to sell yourself a bit harder.

Conclusion

As I've always worked in the UK, I have nothing with which to compare it. I think it's fair to say that it's a varied and competitive job market, as our contributors suggest, and certainly not at its best just now. I worked with an Australian technical author in the mid-1990s, here on a UK Ancestry visa like Kate, who was a very well-liked member of the team. Many UK workplaces have an international flavour, so you may work with Americans and Europeans as well as Brits, but Kate is right to mention the need to communicate your experience clearly – you're travelling to the far side of the world and you must expect to have to do a little explaining to the locals. It only remains to wish you good luck – remember that fortune favours the brave!

Marian Newell

A Fellow and Council member of the ISTC, Marian Newell is Editor of the Institute's quarterly journal, *Communicator*. She has been a technical author since 1985 and a freelance since 1997. She can be contacted at journal.editor@istc.org.uk

Client profile: Agronico Research

Technical writing: what's in a name?

Geoffrey Marnell

What is technical writing? How *technical* does technical writing need to be? And is the title of the professional suited to what we do?

Let's start off with a spot of surface analysis: at the simplest level, there are two broad views on what technical writing is: a prescriptivist view and a descriptivist view.

Prescriptivist view

The prescriptivist view is that technical writing is writing about *technical* matters:

- "A working definition of technical … communication should recognize the technical nature of the subject …"[1]

- "Technical writing is a form of written communication that conveys scientific and technical information in a clearly defined and accurate form."[2]

A common definition of *technical* is "relating to or connected with the mechanical or industrial arts and the applied sciences"[3]. This is a definition that chimes well with many who are unaware of what our profession does. And yet it doesn't marry with the work that many technical writers actually do. It is stretching the meaning of *technical* to consider the following domains especially technical:

- bookkeeping

- human resources procedures

- gaming

And yet it is *technical* writers who are called on to write procedures explaining how to reconcile bank accounts, how to apply for long-service leave and how to play Tetris.

Descriptivist view

The descriptivist view ignores the denotation and connotation of the word *technical* and looks instead at what actually goes on in our profession. By taking such a view, we find that:

- technical writers mostly engage in *procedural* writing (that is, *instructional* or *how-to* writing)

- the subject matter is sometimes *but not always* technical (as the word is commonly understood)

On the descriptivist view, it is the *type of writing* we do, not the subjects we write about, that identifies us as technical writers. Here are some definitions in that vein:

> "the large body of writing which may be called technical writing—how-to books or procedure manuals on a variety of topics: farming, gardening, animal husbandry, surveying, navigation, military science, accounting, recreation, estate management, household management, cooking, medicine, bee-keeping, silkworm production [etc.] …"[4]

> "The purpose of technical communication is generally to instruct the reader (as opposed to scientific communication or journalism, which inform the reader). For example, online help teaches the reader how to perform various tasks using a software package; a car manual teaches the reader how to maintain and repair a car; and a set of illustrations teaches airline passengers how to behave in the event of an emergency."[5]

So:

> Technical writing could be considered as the dissemination of practical knowledge (technical or otherwise), that is, knowledge about *how to do things*.

The descriptivist view is, I suggest, the better approach to defining our profession. Just as prescriptivist grammars risk irrelevancy by insisting on rules that few follow, a prescriptivist view of technical writing, with its definitional straight-jacket, risks irrelevancy. A parallel with science might be instructive. Science was once called *natural philosophy*, but to insist that what natural philosophy is should always be tied to the denotation and connotation of the word *philosophy* would have been futile. It would have led, as eventually happened, to a new name for the discipline.

Just as *natural philosophy* connotes a limited approach to knowledge—an *a priori* approach based on reason alone, unlike science with its *a posteriori* approach based on observation and experiment—*technical* writing connotes a limited approach to practical knowledge: limited to technical subjects. The former limitation, once fully recognised, led to a change of name: the advent of the term *science*. Perhaps, then, it is time for a new name for our profession, one that recognises the limitation of the term *technical*.

What about writing?

If our professional adjective—*technical*—is misleading, what about our professional noun: *writing*? It is incontrovertible that what most of us do

1. D Zimmerman & D Clark, *The Random House guide to scientific and technical communication*, Random House, New York, 1987, p. 3.
2. LM Haydon, *The complete guide to writing and producing technical manuals*, Wiley-Interscience, 1995, p. 2.
3. Macquarie Dictionary Online at http://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/. Viewed 27 June 2009.
4. E Tebeaux, *The emergence of a tradition: technical writing in the English Renaissance*, 1475–1640, p. 93.
5. Australian Society for Technical Communication website, http://astcvic.org.au/technical_communication/about.html. Viewed 15 January 2008.

most of the time is write. Therefore *writing* does seem to be an appropriate noun.

But technical writers do, and have always done, more than just writing. When we create a document template or a cascading style sheet, we are doing the work of graphic designers. (Likewise when we create a flowchart or illustration to describe a process or procedure.) When we add an index to the back of a user guide or to an online help system, we are doing the work of an indexer. When we create an element definition document (EDD), write an XML transform or specialise DITA, we are doing the work of … And now the waters muddy. Some of us spend a good deal of our time doing things other than writing. The question arises, then: do we need to reconsider the noun in our title—*writing*—as we probably do the adjective: *technical*?

Ignoring *technical* for the moment, there seems to be three possible approaches:

- retain *technical writing* for whatever practices folk who call themselves technical writers do, whether or not it involves much writing

- restrict *technical writing* to those practices where writing is pre-eminent and invent a new term— say, *documentation technician*—for those who assist technical writers but don't have writing as a primary responsibility

- look for a new name that covers all the practices that all folk who now call themselves technical writers do

The first and third approaches seem to have been the ones we have adopted, with varying enthusiasm from time to time. Many of us are happy to retain *technical writing* for whatever activities lead to the production of how-to materials. Others have pushed for names that downplay writing so as to better connote, if not denote, the wider range of activities we engage in. And thus instead of *technical writer* we have *technical communicator*, *content provider*, *end-user assistance professional*, *information designer*, *documentation developer*, *documenter*, and so on.

Would consistency be a help to our profession? A single name would, surely, help promote us as a block to industry, commerce and government.

To keep our name or change it? Let's consider some arguments from both sides.

Does doing more than writing necessitate a name change?

First, let's be clear that practitioners of many professions do more than what is connoted or implied by a literal reading of their profession's name. Teachers do more than teach. They also act as playground monitors, sports-day referees, mentors,

excursion leaders, and curriculum designers. But they still call themselves *teachers*. Likewise, surgeons give consultations, fire-fighters rescue cats from trees, accountants give financial advice. And yet one sees no moves by surgeons, fire-fighters and accountants to change the name of their profession.

Perhaps it is a question of how much time we spend doing things other than writing? If we spent 60% of our time on graphic design, then maybe we would be a graphic designer who also did some technical writing. Vice versa if we spent 60% of our time doing technical writing. We would be a writer who did some graphic design.

But what if we do a number of other things—product research, project management, graphic design, scripting macros, indexing, and so on—that *together* occupy us for more than 50% of our time, with writing consuming the remaining, minor part of our time? Might not this justify a change of name?

But another sort of writer—a novelist, biographer or historian, for example—might likewise spend more time doing things other than writing. They might, for example, spend three years researching a book and only one year writing it. Should they be classified as, say, a *researcher* rather than as a *writer* on the basis of the relative times spent on each activity? I doubt it. It seems that what distinguishes them as writers, rather than as researchers, is the final goal of their various activities: to *write* a book.

The parallel is this: perhaps it doesn't matter how much time a technical writer spends on template design, illustrations, macro-coding, structured content rules, indexing and so on. If the goal of all these activities, taken together, is to produce a piece of *written* work, then they are *writers*. Just as Martin Amis is a writer regardless of how much research goes into his novels, a technical writer is a writer regardless of how much supporting but non-writing activity goes into the preparation of a user guide, online help system or the like.

Technical writing is the dissemination of practical knowledge (technical or otherwise), that is, knowledge about how to do things.

But some of us don't do any writing at all

We need to be careful not to beg the question here (in the sense of assuming what we want to prove). If some who call themselves technical writers don't do any writing, might one legitimate response be to ask what right they have to call themselves technical writers? Just as we might object to someone who paints houses calling themselves an artist, might we not object to, say, an illustrator or cartoonist calling themselves a technical writer?

But the work of some illustrators and cartoonists clearly resembles the work of a technical writer *when considered from the perspective of the goal of the activity*. If someone spends all their working time creating

non-verbal illustrations that explain *how to do things*— such as how airline passengers should respond to an emergency—then this is clearly in the domain of technical writing as earlier defined: "the dissemination of practical knowledge (technical or otherwise), that is, knowledge about how to do things".

Here, then, might be a good argument for looking for an alternative to *writing* in *technical writing*. The *purpose* or *goal* of technical writing is a much more solid ground for defining what we do than the means by which we do it. There can be constancy in the purpose or goal without limiting ourselves to changeable means. In other words, the means can vary—writing, movie-making, illustration, and so on—while the goal remains the same: disseminating practical knowledge by means of instructions. Thus a better approach to naming our profession lies, perhaps, in finding a term that closely matches the profession's goal or purpose.

Before we explore this further, note that some who work in our profession do not have, as their primary goal, the dissemination of practical knowledge. For example, some spend all their time creating element definition documents (EDDs), writing XML transforms, designing templates, coding VBA macros, specialising DITA and the like. These roles are akin to that of a laboratory technician, who provides the infrastructure for scientists to do their work but doesn't engage in any science. If we adopt a goal-based definition of our profession, then these folk may well need to be excluded. Perhaps a more suitable name for them is *documentation technician*.

"Err... Excuse me Sir, you've forgotten the user manual for your super mini mobile."

Does having a common goal necessitate a name change?

Focusing on our primary goal appears to be a good starting point for assessing what we should call our profession. But why must a shared goal—a goal shared, say, by writers and illustrators—require us to assume or concoct a name that in some way implies inclusivity for all who share that goal? A physician, osteopath and chiropractor all share a common goal: to make or keep people healthy. But physicians, osteopaths and chiropractors get by quite well without a common name, a name that somehow implies or connotes the activities of each and every such profession. Likewise with train drivers and bus drivers. Their common goal is to transport passengers to where they want to go, but no-one in their profession appears keen on changing these job titles to a name that in some way covers both activities.

In a similar vein, there seems to be no logical bar to having separate names for those whose shared goal is to disseminate practical knowledge *but who do it in different ways*, say:

- *instructional writer*: a person who spends most of their working time preparing written instructions, being what most of us in the profession do most of the time

- *instructional illustrator*: a person who spends most of their working time preparing cartoons, diagrams, illustrations and the like that give non-verbal instructions

- *instructional documentary-maker*: a person who spends most of their working time preparing animated instructions

During the course of their careers, some technical writers will fall into two or three of these categories. But here the focus is on those who don't do any writing. It is the work of these folk who have prompted many a call to move our name away from *technical writing*. How we might name whose work straddles these categories was discussed in "What about writing?" on page 14.

So, should the status quo remain?

This paper has considered some of the arguments put forward for why we should change the name of our profession. Those based on the fact that many of us do more than just write and that some of us don't write at all are not especially strong. Other professions have not felt a need to change their name because some practitioners do things other than what is implied by their name, and other professions have not felt a need to amalgamate under the one rubric just because they share a primary goal.

But that's no bar to us changing our name. The lack of a *need* to do something doesn't imply that we shouldn't do it. Indeed, what would prompt us to

seriously reconsider our name is if we could come up with one that does neatly and inclusively capture what we primarily do: disseminate practical knowledge. Let's consider some of the terms that technical writers have called themselves of late and see if any meet this challenge.

What have we called ourselves?

We have established that the common, longstanding name for our profession—*technical writing*—is inadequate. What we do need not be technical, and the purpose or goal of our profession can be met in ways other than by writing. This realisation has led some practitioners to adopt new names.

Technical communicator

After *technical writer*, *technical communicator* is the most frequently used name for our profession. But it too has its flaws. For a start, the adjective is misleading. The domains we write about are often non-technical.

The noun too is not ideal. Consider a broadcaster of a radio show to do with the sciences. Such a person is called a *science communicator*: they communicate with the general public by informing them about issues of science. But a technical communicator is not someone who communicates with the general public by informing them about issues of technology. We deliver *practical* knowledge, *how-to* knowledge, not information of a general nature (as might a technology journalist). So, perhaps the term *communication* is too wide.

Also, *communication* has been appropriated by the spin industries. A job for a *communication consultant* these days is invariably a job for a public relations person or spin doctor. We would not want the profession seen by non-members as that of technology evangelists, spinning the benefits of technology just as a PR person spins the benefits of, say, a high-fat diet.

Perhaps it is for these reasons that many technical writers have sought to call themselves by names not obviously connected with *technology* or with *communication*. Let's consider some of these names.

Content provider

This term is just far too wide. A journalist, graphic designer and musician can all be seen as content providers, so *content provider* hardly identifies and differentiates what we do in our profession from day to day.

End-user assistance professional

This term likewise is far too wide. A call-centre representative is also an end-user assistance professional, as is a roadside breakdown mechanic, a librarian and a golf instructor. So the term doesn't identify and differentiate what we do.

Information designer

Information is knowledge. To call ourselves *information designers* is to fail to distinguish between the sort of knowledge that is our prime concern from other sorts of knowledge. Technical writers are primarily concerned with imparting *practical* knowledge (that is, *how-to* or *procedural* knowledge), not with the sort of knowledge that, say, a physics teacher might be charged with imparting. A teacher who designs a physics curriculum is also an information designer; thus *information designer* is too wide a term to identify and differentiate what we do.

Documenter

Not surprisingly, a *documenter* is someone who documents. If I document the species and number of birds that visit my backyard each year, I am documenting something: but I am hardly engaging in technical writing. Again, the term is far too wide to be a suitable substitute for technical writer.

Documentation developer

This is the term preferred in the recent set of ISO/IEC standards. But the word *documents* applies to much more than the products that our profession typically develops. A diarist documents when they make entries in a diary; a public servant develops documents when they create a land title or a birth certificate. Documents are tendered in courts of law every day, but user guides are not.

Go to www.abelard.com.au/survey.html and specify what you think our profession should be called.

What name do you think best fits? A survey.

The fact that the names we have so far given our profession have weaknesses shouldn't lead us to conclude that there is no suitable name. We just may not have stumbled upon it yet. And thus the purpose of the accompanying survey. It enables you to specify, anonymously, what name you think best fits. It could be a name already discussed in this paper, or a new name altogether.

And just to relieve the seriousness of the endeavour, there's a section of the survey for you to suggest a humorous name. (*Domestic ecologist* is a humorous alternative to *garbage collector*, so what might be a humorous alternative to *technical writer*?)

You can find the survey at:

www.abelard.com.au/survey.html

An image if the survey page can be seen on page 18 below. The results will appear in the November issue of *Words*.

Geoffrey Marnell

Survey: What should technical writing be called?

In the article entitled "Technical writing: what's in a name?" starting on page 14, various reasons were considered for why the longstanding name for our profession—*techncial writing*—might be considered inadequate. Over the years, many new names have been adopted by technical writers, but none has cemented itself as a generally preferred alternative name. (*Technical communication* has probably achieved greatest currency of all the alternatives to *technical writing*.)

The *Words* team has created a web-based survey designed to gather the thoughts of practising technical writers on what their profession should be called. The survey can be found at:

<p align="center">www.abelard.com.au/survey.html</p>

Click the link above to open the survey page (which looks like the image below).

Responses are anonymous. Results will appear in the next issue of *Words*, to be published on November 1.

If you have any queries about the survey, contact the *Words* team at words@abelard.com.au.

Abelard Consulting

Technical writing ■ Technical writer placement services ■ Technical and scientific writing courses

Technical Writing Survey: What should the profession be called?

■ Purpose
The purpose of this survey is to gather information from practicising technical writers and technical authors on their preferred name for their profession. Should we be called technical communicators, information designers, content providers, instructional writers or ...? Choose one from the list below or make a suggestion.

If you like, you can also be creative and suggest a humorous name for our profession. For example, a garbage collector could, for a laugh, be called a *domestic ecologist*. So, might a technical writer be a task poet? Process grinder? How-to wrangler? Or ...?

■ Closing date
October 15, 2009

■ Results
The results of the survey will be published on this web page in early November. They will also appear in the November 2009 issue of *Words*, a free, quarterly bulletin for technical writers and communicators available by clicking here.

■ Background
Some arguments for and against changing the profession's name can be found in the August 2009 issue of *Words*, available by clicking here.

■ Queries
If you have any queries about the survey, contact words@abelard.com.au.

Survey Form

Country:
Australia

Years working in the profession:
0-4 years   ⦿ Employee   ◯ Contractor

What should our profession be called?
Technical writer

Provide a name for our profession (if your preferred name is not listed).

What activities take up most of your working time? [Optional]

What is the goal or purpose of our profession? [Optional]

Provide a humorous name, if you like. [Optional]

Comments [Optional]:

send

Click **send** to submit your survey response, or click the back button to return to the previous page.

Superscripts and subscripts in HTML

Geoffrey Marnell

A cursory browse through science-related web pages will reveal that many folk responsible for creating these pages do not know how to get characters to appear as a subscript or superscript. This is a pity considering that many formulas and reactions—in chemistry, mathematics and particle physics, for example—traditionally take advantage of subscript or superscript settings. So instead of:

> This instrument was mainly used … for defining outburst conditions in Anthracite mines with **CO_2** in the lower Silesian coal field basin.

we see:

> "This instrument was mainly used … for defining outburst conditions in Anthracite mines with **CO2** in the lower Silesian coal field basin."[1]

In many cases, the knowledgeable reader will quickly work out what the author meant, but it some cases this may not be possible. Such cases include those where the same character is used in both a superscript and subscript position in the same equation, as in:

$$M^2 = P_a \cdot P^a$$

If the subscript and superscript characters are both placed on the baseline in a HTML version of this formula, as is common practice, some readers may be unsure whether two variables are being multiplied together or one variable is being squared.[2]

Linking to a cascading style sheet (CSS)

Creating subscripts and superscripts in HTML is relatively straightforward. If you have a linked cascading stylesheet, copy the following lines to it:

```
.superscript {
    font-size: x-small;
    position: relative;
    bottom: 8px;
}
.subscript {
    font-size: x-small;
    position: relative;
    top: 5px;
}
```

These lines of code simply create two new styles, called *superscript* and *subscript*. All you need to do now is enclose, in a web page linked to the cascading stylesheet, whatever text needs to be superscripted or subscripted in a pair of *span* tags with the appropriate style name as the *class* attribute.

For example:

```
H<span class="subscript">2</span>O
```

yields H_2O in a web browser. Likewise:

```
SO<span class="subscript">2</span>
```

yields SO_2 in a web browser.

For a superscript, specify *superscript* as the class attribute. For example:

```
K<span class="superscript">+</span>
```

yields K^+ in a web browser. Likewise:

```
<em>y</em> = <em>kx</em><span
class="superscript">3</span>
```

yields $y = kx^3$. (Note that the <em> tags in this example are merely specifying that the enclosed characters are to be displayed as italics.)

To change how far the superscripts and subscripts are raised or lowered from the baseline, modify the *bottom* and *top* parameters respectively in the style definition. (This may be necessary if your targeted browser interprets these parameters oddly.)

Embedding the definition in a web page

If you don't have a linked cascading style sheet, you can embed the style definitions in the HTML page itself. Simply place the following lines of code within the <HEAD> element of the page:

```
<style>
.superscript {
    font-size: x-small;
    position: relative;
    bottom: 8px;
}
.subscript {
    font-size: x-small;
    position: relative;
    top: 5px;
}
</style>
```

Again, all you need to do is enclose whatever text needs to be superscripted or subscripted in a pair of *span* tags with the appropriate style name as the *class* attribute, as explained in the previous section.

Snippets in Dreamweaver

If you often need to insert a block of code—such as `<span class="subscript">`—typing it each time can become tedious. Dreamweaver's *snippets* feature enables you to give a block of code a name. When you want to insert that block, you can select its name from the **Snippets** window. The block automatically appears in your code, wherever your cursor is. (Open the **Snippets** window by first selecting **Window** from the main menu.)

Geoffrey Marnell

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1. See http://www.uow.edu.au/eng/outburst/html/ prediction_index.html. Viewed 8 June 2009.
2. This formula is taken from Roger Penrose, *The road to reality*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2004, p. 671.

Miscellany

Revival of *Australian Style*

Many keen observers of Australian English have, over the years, cherished a biannual publication of the Style Council Centre at Macquarie University. The publication, available to subscribers at no cost, had the apt and snappy title *Australian Style.*

Australian Style was edited by Pam Peters, publisher of the Macquarie Dictionary and Professor of Linguistics at Macquarie University. On Pam's retirement, *Australian Style* went into limbo. But now it has been revived, as an online publication. You can read the latest issue at http://www.ling.mq.edu.au/news/australian_style.htm.

The revived *Australian Style* continues the tradition, with articles on current research into English usage in Australia and New Zealand, notes on what ABC listeners are saying about broadcast language (recorded by the ABC's Standing Committee on Spoken English), reviews of new publications, letters from correspondents on matters linguistic, and a feedback survey to gather information from readers on trends in Australian English usage (many of which are sure to surprise, if not vex, the sticklers in our midst).

The present editor, Adam Smith, will describe the purpose of *Australian Style* in detail in the next issue of *Words*.

AUSTRALIAN STYLE

A NATIONAL BULLETIN ON ISSUES IN AUSTRALIAN STYLE AND ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

Announcing the online rebirth of the biannual newsletter published at Macquarie University, featuring:

- articles on language usage and research
- the Feedback questionnaire
- the exclusive crossword Rubicon by David Astle
- cartoons by Judy Dunn
- book reviews, a new word column, and much more

Website: http://www.ling.mq.edu.au/news/australian_style.htm
Contact: adam.smith@mq.edu.au

All talk, no walk? Curious contradictions

■ The widely acknowledged guru of web useability, Jakob Neilsen, has strongly advised on the importance of having a search facility on web pages. In his paper "Top Ten Guidelines for Homepage Usability"[1], Neilsen advises web designers to include a search input box because:

> "Search is an important part of any big website. When users want to search, they typically scan the homepage looking for 'the little box where I can type', so your search should be a box. Make your search box at least 25 characters wide, so it can accommodate multiple words without obscuring parts of the user's query."

Good advice indeed. But check out the home page of the Neilsen Norman Group (a web consulting company of which Jakob is a senior partner).[2] Not a search box in sight.

■ International Standard ISO/IEC 26514 (2008), titled *Systems and software engineering—Requirements for designers and developers of user documentation*, declares that an index is mandatory "in documents of more than about 40 pages".[3] The standard is 143 pages long—and has no index. And wait, there's more …

¿Qué?

> "For a single-page document, such as quick reference cards, the identification data may appear on the same page as the rest of the document."[4]

How many vowels are there in English?

It all depends on whether you are asking about written English or spoken English. In written English there are five vowels: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u*. The remaining 21 characters in the English alphabet are called consonants.

But linguists also identify vowels according to the way particular sounds are produced by the vocal chords. By this measure, there are 20 vowels and 24 consonants in the English language.[5] Given that there are 44 vocable sounds (or phonetic elements) in English and only 26 characters in the alphabet, learning English spelling was always going to be a joyless task for those new to the language.

And what indefinite article we use—*a* or *an*—depends on the *sound* of the syllable that is to follow it, not on whether a *written* vowel or consonant starts the word that follows. And that is something else that many school teachers got wrong.

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1. http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20020512.html. Viewed 9 April 2009.
2. http://www.nngroup.com/. Viewed 9 April 2009.
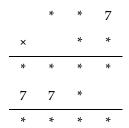3. See section 10.4 on page 46.
4. ibid. p. 48.
5. David Crystal, *How language works*, Penguin, Camberwell, 2006, p. 57.

Mindstretchers

Geoffrey Marnell

Sixes and sevens? All sevens at least.

In the following multiplication, all digits other than the 7's have been replaced by asterisks. Knowing that the answer contains just two 2's, can you replace the asterisks with the appropriate digits?

```
        *   *   7
    ×       *   *
    ─────────────
    *   *   *   *
    7   7   *
    ─────────────
    *   *   *   *
```

More than meets the eye

The words in four of the five sets below have been grouped according to the same principle. Can you discover what the principle is?

1. enraged, pacified, angered
2. picturesque, commonplace, artistic
3. banalities, satisfiable, insatiable
4. lament, corporeal, mental
5. bounder, dressed, unrobed

Solutions will appear in the next issue of *Words*.

Solutions to the last puzzles

Puzzle 1

Only sentence 5 is true.

Consider sentence 3 first and suppose it is true. There are six subsets of three true sentences out of the five, given the truth of sentence 3: (1, 2, 3), (1, 3, 4), (1, 3, 5), (2, 3, 4), (2, 3, 5) and (3, 4, 5). All, however, yield contradictions. If 1, 2 and 3 were the only true sentences, 1 and 2 would have to be false. If just 1, 3 and 4 were true, 1 would be false. If only 1, 3 and 5 are true, 4 too must be true. If 2, 3 and 4 are true, sentence 2 must be false. If 2, 3 and 5 are true, again 2 must be false. Finally, if 3, 4 and 5 are the only true sentences, sentence 4 would have to be false. We can conclude, then, that 3 is false and therefore one, two or four sentences are true.

If four sentences are true, they can only be sentences 1, 2, 4 and 5. But then 2 and 5 would have to be false.

There are six possibilities where just two sentences are true: (1,2), (1, 4), (1, 5), (2, 4), (2, 5) and (4, 5). The first three possibilities must be ruled out, because sentence 1 must, in all instances, be false. The fourth possibility, (2, 4), renders sentence 5 also true; the fifth makes sentence 2 false; and the last possibility renders both 4 and 5 false, not true.

So just one sentence, at most, can be true, and it is not difficult to see that only sentence 5 fits the bill.

Puzzle 2

The two muddled words are SECRET and EXPOSED

In the next issue

- *Australian Style*: the rebirth of a chronicle of Australian English usage
- DITA: what every technical writer needs to know?
- Mastering master docs and subdocs in MS Word
- Create and apply formats in FrameMaker
- Is structured authoring a paradigm shift?

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