

IMPLEMENTING A TECHNICAL WRITING PROGRAM: THE ALGONQUIN EXPERIENCE

Barry Barclay

Editor's Note:

The following is a summary of Barry Barclay's address to the National Conference, Guelph. Shortly after, he accepted the opportunity of beginning graduate studies in Texas and has been too busy to expand the summary into an article. This information, however, merits presentation because Algonquin's diploma program was the first in Canada designed specifically to train technical writers.

Further details may be obtained by writing:

Mr. Brian O'Meara, Coordinator
Technical Writer Program
Algonquin College
Rideau Campus
200 Lees Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario
K1s 0C5

In 1982 industry's need for competent technical writers surfaced at a meeting between Algonquin College personnel and representatives of high technology firms in the Ottawa area. Subsequent meetings established that the marketplace could absorb 20 to 25 new writers every year; as a result, an Ad Hoc Advisory Committee was established in early 1982 to describe the structure and content of an appropriate technical writing program.

The committee decided on a 3 year (6-semester) plan. Students would take the first 3 of these 6 semesters in one of the regular technology programs (preferably Computer Science or Electronics) and transfer to the Technical Writer Program for their last 3 semesters. The committee specified the content of these final 3 Technical Writer semesters, expressed their confidence in being able to offer summer jobs in the technical writing field, and began the process of obtaining provincial approval of the program.

In late November of 1983 the program was approved by Ontario's Council of Regents, with the proviso that the number of Technical Writer semesters be expanded from three to four.

During the next few weeks 20 students were recruited for the first (4th semester) class, and the program began early in January 1984. Individual testing and interviewing ensured that only applicants with highly developed writing skills were accepted.

Of the 20 students, 13 were direct entries from outside Algonquin College; most of these possessed advanced qualifications, typically an Engineering or Bachelor of Science degree. Virtually all students turned out to be strongly motivated and extremely competent.

Curriculum design was based on one highly pragmatic (and unattainable) objective: to graduate technical writers whose need for on-the-job training would be zero. Of the 26 classroom hours per week, 14 hours were devoted to communication skills (including technical writing, graphic design, and word processing); the remaining 12 hours were given over to technical subjects (statistics, microprocessor design, and computer architecture).

During this first semester it became clear that the economic recession would eliminate many of the summer work positions more or less guaranteed by companies represented on the Advisory Committee. However, 16 of the 19 remaining students found summer work as technical writers; of these, 4 are self-employed in a company they formed themselves. Feedback from employers is extremely positive: they have favourably compared the performance of the Algonquin students with the performance of experienced writers hired recently for full-time positions.

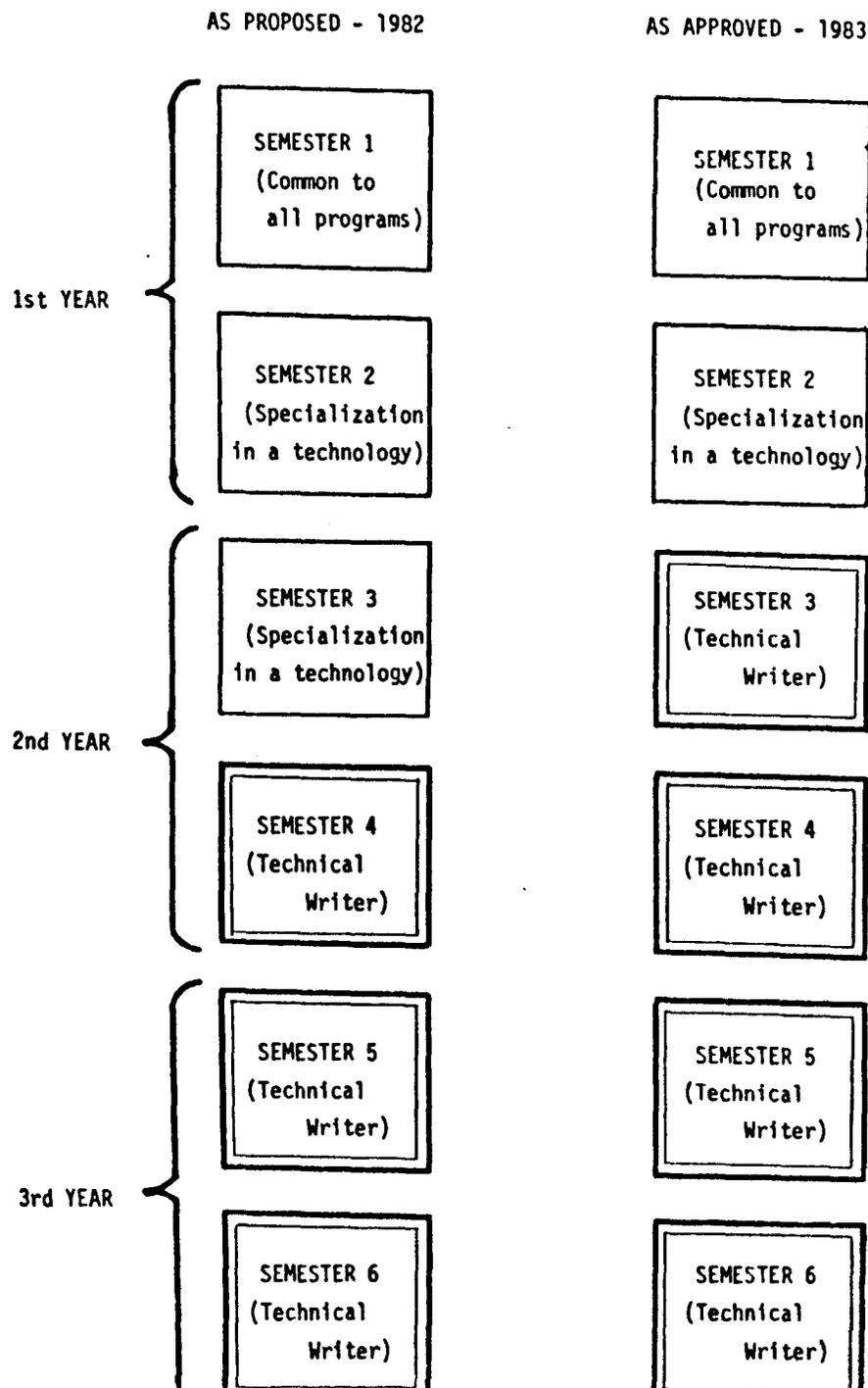
ALGONQUIN COLLEGE - TECHNICAL WRITER PROGRAM

AD HOC ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Algonquin College - Computing Science/Electronics Department
Algonquin College - English Department

Atomic Energy of Canada Limited
Bell-Northern Research
Computing Devices of Canada Limited
Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources
Mitel Corporation
The NABU Network
S&S Software Limited
The Society for Technical Communication
Systemhouse Limited

PROGRAM STRUCTURE



PERMANENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

- Bell-Northern Research
- Gandalf Data Limited
- Mitel Corporation
- The NABU Network
- NIVA Writing Services Limited
- S&S Software Limited
- The Society for Technical Communication
- Systemhouse Limited

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

1st Semester	Communication I Mathematics I Chemistry I Electricity I	Drafting I Physics I Introduction to Computing
2nd Semester	Communication II Introduction to Calculus Passive Circuits Pascal	Physics II Basic Electronics Construction Techniques
3rd Semester	Technical Communication I Concepts in Mathematics Data Processing Assembly and Production Systems	Physics IIIA ONE of: Pascal Basic Electronics Electronics I
4th Semester	Technical Communication II Statistics Microprocessor A Basic Computer Architecture	Word Processing Graphics I (Design)
5th Semester	Technical Communication III Document Planning Business Management Project Planning	Computer Systems Electrical Communication Graphics II (Videotex)
6th Semester	Technical Communication IV Document Management II Engineering Systems Law	Project

STUDENT PROFILE

1. TOTAL RECRUITED: 20
DROPOUTS: 1
2. SOURCES OF RECRUITMENT:
7 transferred from within the College
13 applied as direct entries
3. EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL WRITERS: 8
4. DEGREES OR DIPLOMAS HELD: 13
- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Diploma, Electrical Engineering: | 1 |
| Diploma, Computer Programming: | 2 |
| Diploma, Radio and TV Arts: | 1 |
| Engineering degree and/or P.Eng.: | 3 |
| Bachelor of Science: | 4 |
| Bachelor of Journalism: | 1 |
| Bachelor of Commerce: | 1 |
5. PERSONAL PROFILE:
- | | |
|-------------|----------|
| 11 married, | 9 single |
| 15 male, | 5 female |
| Age: 23-24 | 6 |
| 25-28 | 10 |
| over 28 | 4 |

WRITING A CANADIAN ADAPTATION

Dixie Stockmayer

Business Communication: Strategies and Skills by Richard C. Huseman, James M. Lahiff and John D. Hatfield, Illinois: Dryden Press, 1981, 431 pp.

In May 1982, when I accepted an invitation to prepare a Canadian adaptation of the Huseman et al text, Business Communication, I was unprepared for what lay before me over the next two years: deadlines that seemed reasonable when I agreed to them initially rushed by; a task that I anticipated might take three or four hours would take three or four times as long; changes which appeared easy were not. However, I believe that the product justifies the planning and hard work which the adaptation required.

PLANNING THE ADAPTATION

The obvious changes required in the Canadian adaptation were, of course:

- the use of the metric system
- the replacement of American spellings, usage, and examples with Canadian material

However, I was also asked to review the text to identify its major strengths and weaknesses with specific reference to:

1. the coverage given to particular topics or areas
 - should the coverage of certain topics be expanded? abbreviated? or deleted?
 - should new topic areas be expanded?
2. the number and nature of the examples in the original text
 - are there sufficient examples?
 - to what extent are specifically Canadian examples or applications needed?