

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT

A major change is occurring in both the business and technical writing fields that we, as teachers of technical and business writing, cannot ignore. Twelve months ago the expression "Desk-Top Publishing" was comparatively new and had little implication for the average business or technical writer. But now it has become a multi-million dollar industry that will drastically change the role of "writer" as we know it.

Not long ago we taught students that they should handwrite the first draft of a letter or report, have it typed by someone in the typing pool, and then review and revise the draft (sometimes several times, with second and third drafts being typed between each) until the letter or report conveys its information clearly and concisely. More recently--with the advent of the word processor at the typist's desk--we have stressed how easy it is for the typist to make changes and that numerous retypings are no longer a burden, even at the last minute. And already some of us are teaching technologists and technicians to keystroke their reports directly into a personal computer or mainframe such as the VAX, rather than handwrite a draft, and then to review their work and make any corrections themselves, at the terminal. (We even encourage them to use the system's spell-check programme!)

Desk-top publishing (DTP) is going through a similar evolution, but light-years faster. Initially DTP seemed to be the domain of organizations with sufficient financial clout to invest in a large-screen computer, comprehensive composition and graphics/illustrating programs, a sophisticated page makeup program that could combine text and graphics, and a high-quality laser printer that could produce "equivalent to typeset" copy. Then along came the Macintosh, with its inexpensive, easy-to-use, WYSIWYG ("What you see is what you get") composition method and an interactive page makeup program. Suddenly anyone could become a publisher! (True, the quality was not nearly that of the sophisticated machines, but the technology was there.) And only a year later systems in the \$10 000 to \$12 000 range began to appear, systems producing highly professional copy that need a magnifying glass to distinguish the laser-produced words from true typeset copy.

Business and government alike have begun to realize that the cost of preparing typeset copy can be reduced as much as 90 percent by doing computer makeup in-house. The implications for printers and typesetters are enormous: soon few businesses, or even individuals, will be calling on them to typeset and make up their forms, instruction manuals, newsletters, brochures, and advertising literature. Instead, clients will take camera-ready copy directly to the printer--or even print it themselves, in-house.

There is a well-grounded fear in the publishing industry that DTP will result in a sharp downgrading of the quality of publications, as neophytes who have no idea of how to design a publication become intrigued with the new toy--a toy that not only will cut the cost of printing but also will speed up preparation time. More, it will provide complete in-house control of a printed product, from concept to camera-ready copy. To the business manager, in both the private and public domains, the advantages will far outweigh the hidden disadvantage of poorer quality.

But what has all this to do with the teaching of technical writing? On the surface, little. But under the surface, a lot. Very shortly, technologists and technicians who previously had been concerned only with words may have to design the forms, reports, and instruction manuals they write. Conceivably, they may even have to "work up" an advertising leaflet or small brochure. Unintentionally, they will be moving into a field until now dominated by graphics specialists.

As teachers of technical writing we should become familiar with the publishing technology our students will encounter. We should learn how to integrate text and graphics at a computer terminal so that we can tell our students how to do it. We should be ready to teach them at least the elements of good design. And we should do it soon, because the technology is here.

How can you and I acquire this knowledge? I can think of six steps we can take right within our own communities:

1. Gain hands-on experience in practical text processing by writing memos, letters, case studies, and assignments at a computer terminal, using word-processing software such as Word, WordPerfect and PCWrite. Ideally, become familiar with keystroking into both mainframe and personal computers, and learn more than just the easiest WP programs (i.e. become familiar with the more complex systems such as Wordstar and even VAX Runoff).
2. Get to know a "Macintosh" user with a Mac+ or Mac II and ask for a demonstration of the system, from which to gain a "first (uncomplicated) look" at desk-top publishing. (Try to get some hands-on practice, too!)
3. Visit a computer sales outlet to see a demonstration of PageMaker or similar desk-top publishing software used with a laser printer. Ideally, during either this visit or the one at step 2 try to get some hands-on experience in forming headings and titles, using a multicolumn page layout, formatting and justifying text, and sizing and inserting illustrations. (Also discover the limitations inherent in integrating photographs into electronic publishing.)

4. Visit a local word-processing business that uses state-of-the-art WP software and equipment to produce typeset quality camera-ready copy, and ask for a demonstration of the equipment and the work they can produce. (For example, "Keystrokes"--a two-person word-processing business in Winnipeg--provides a top-notch desk-top publishing service using a Compaq Deskpro personal computer, sCLASERplus software, and a Hewlett-Packard LaserJet printer.)
5. Visit a traditional typesetting supplier and talk to a typesetter to learn: the difference between traditional and computer typesetting; the more common type fonts and "point" sizes; guidelines for using various type faces within one document; and the elements of good design in developing page layouts. Or--probably better--contract with a typesetter to come into the department and address several teachers simultaneously.
6. Attend a seminar or demonstration of a computer-aided design (CAD) system to see how illustrations can be developed on-screen. If your university or college has a CAD/CAM system--and many do--you won't have far to go.

And read everything you can put your hands on concerning desk-top or electronic publishing. Much is already in Technical Communication (the journal of the Society for Technical Communication), the Transactions on Professional Communication (the journal of the IEEE Professional Communication Society), the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication (published by Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.), The Bulletin (of The Association for Business Communication), our own Technostyle, and The Technical Writing Teacher (the journal of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing--our sister organization in the U.S.). Here, for example, are notes on some recent and noteworthy articles:

- o Elizabeth Keyes' article "Information Design: Maximizing the Power and Potential of Electronic Publishing Equipment" in Transactions on Professional Communication, (PC-30:1, March 1987).
- o Ronald K. Jurgen's summary "Desktop publishing: what it can and cannot do" in IEEE Spectrum (24:3, March 1987).
- o Cheryl Rhodes' paper "Overview of Desktop Publishing Products" (Ms Rhodes is the editor of Desktop Publishing, Bove & Rhodes Associates, PO Box 620025, Woodside, CA, 94062).
- o A special issue of the Journal of Technical Writing and Communication devoted to computers (16:3, 1986).
- o A special quarterly report "There's lots of talk about DESKTOP PUBLISHING" in The Financial Post (Maclean-Hunter), March 16, 1987, p. C1-C16).

- o "NCT Committee Leaps Into Desktop Publishing" in the IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter (30:1, January 1987).
- o "Business turns to in-house publishing" in High Technology (April 1986).
- o "Do-it-yourself publishing" in Machine Design (October 9, 1986).

As teachers of technical writing we are getting into a fascinating new field. It's going to be quite a challenge.

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