

Where Rhetoric Compliments Technical Writing: The Situations Which Call for Persuasiveness

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Introduction

Technical Communication is a vital and important discipline concerned with the authoring of documents that communicate specialized data and processes to specific audiences. (Utah State University, n/d) The formats for these documents may change from organization to organization based on preference and style guides, but almost all tend to encourage the use of Simplified Technical English (STE) which endorses the use of a limited word set and strict writing rules to convey information in the most direct and universal manner. (Braster, n/d) While this approach is meant to be direct, simple, neutral, and factual, it can also leave the user uninterested, disconnected, and bored. (Houston, 2016) The unfortunate side effect of this audience disconnect can be seen in the sheer number of people

who avoid the use of instructional materials- often resulting in ignorance of special product features or functions which might otherwise prove beneficial. (Blackler, Gomez, Popovic, & Thompson, 2014)

Considering the importance of audience engagement in successful communication (Hanifan, 2021), there is an interesting paradox at play. While an author may strive to avoid bias, audience confusion, and inaccuracy for the sake of buy-in, they also run the risk of losing the attention of the very people they are trying to help.

Rhetorical Language as a Solution

Many feel that the use of rhetorical language can help make technical writing more interactive and engaging (James, 2013). Yet, this is a double-edged sword since overuse can cause the audience to question the trustworthiness of information when the author relies on those conventions too much.

By using rhetorical language in key situations, it is possible to preserve audience confidence in the information being presented. Similar to thematic formats that have been adopted as standard practices for certain task, the situational requirements of the document should define how much or how little we rely on rhetorical writing and scientific explanation.

Exploring What Rhetoric Is

Plato- one of the most respected Greek philosophers- believed that rhetoric was a form of flattery and could be used to beguile, trick, and deceive listeners or readers. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020) This feeling that information should be objective and without embellishment is typified in scientific writing and documents. This is a thought process that champions communication of information at its most honest, without any coercion of the reader or audience. Indeed, an article by Michael Davis from 1999 demonstrates how the use of rhetorical language can be unethical where the same information,

presented using different approaches, can lead to entirely different outcomes based merely on the rhetorical language used in its delivery. (Davis, 1999)

In opposition of Plato's beliefs, Aristotle- another legendary Greek philosopher- also held that information can be important, unbiased, and free of corruption, but he also believed that such ideals do not matter if there is no audience receptive to its content. (Bryan, 2019) In consideration of this viewpoint, it becomes apparent that interest and engagement from the audience or readers is necessary to pass along the information that we wish them to consider.

In the technical writing community at large, there has been a movement echoing Aristotle's sentiment over the past few decades. S. Michael Halloran's article from 1978 points out the importance of using rhetoric as a means of drawing in wider audiences beyond the scientific community by using adaptation of language as a means to translate information to include a wider audience. (Halloran, 1978) A second

article from 2010 illustrates ways in which an audience approach to writing is, essentially, from a rhetorical view and therefore writing in such a perspective is simply authoring from the perspective of the reader. (Johnson, 2010) An article from 2015 postulates “Technical Rhetoric” as a way of helping audiences to understand and accept that there has always been an underlying persuasive element toward the delivery of information through technical communications. Finally, a thesis from 2016 expands upon those ideas by pointing out the importance of humanism in presenting scientific facts unaltered, but in a way that presents that information in different aspects that appeal to the individual realities of the readers, thus encouraging a more dynamic interpretation of data being communicated. (McKinney, 2016)

How Rhetoric Can Enhance Technical Communication

Staunch adherents toward the more scientific method of information dissemination may continue to argue that unbiased, uninfluenced, and

objective information is the only way to deliver texts free of any sort of agenda.

Meanwhile, those that believe Rhetoric has always been an important part of technical communication offer sound arguments for the inclusion of such language as a means of helping the audience to adopt the information being presented.

Perhaps there is no black or white solution to this conundrum. A third option may be simply to establish guidelines for Rhetorical usage in technical documentation as a middle ground. Much as a painter uses different types of media to express art, there may be specific circumstances where Rhetorical language helps to motivate the audience to some end, while keeping them engaged in the outcome being sought, or communicating the data without bias. To more realistically explore this idea, it is necessary to look at what Rhetorical language adds to the typical Simplified English approach.

In typical Simplified Technical writing, the author is encouraged to use imperative language to perform a step for each task. With such an approach, the author is assuming that the reader understands and embraces what they are being told to do or know. While it is direct and easy to follow, it fails to help the reader understand why they might be performing a task and risking losing the reader's engagement.

Rhetorical language may be added to help the reader with a rudimentary sense of what the overall affect may achieve. It also helps the reader invest in that action since they understand how these instructions fit with the ultimate goal being sought. Here the simple act of using language that takes the audience's purposes and goals into consideration, also utilizes some of the basic premises of the Rhetorical Situation to communicate at a more humanistic level. (Mussack & Dsouza, n/d) Ultimately, this language feels much more conversational and fluid, rather than brief and cryptic commands. These tiny contributions may prove to be the difference between a manual that is

never read, and one that provides the user with the information needed to get the most from their product.

Limiting Rhetorical Usage to Preserve Authority

One of the biggest roadblocks keeping Technical Writers from more fully adopting Rhetorical language stems from the fact that the persuasive nature of this approach could cause the reader to question the authenticity of the information being presented. (American Management Association, 2019) This scenario is entirely understandable and may destroy any authority that the author may have established between themselves and the reader. To limit over-usage, the author should plan to approach the use of rhetorical language in the same manner they would for STE, by using brief and simple words, rather than extensive diatribes which may confuse the main point. (Johnson, Has Plain Language Deepened or Ruined Our Delight in Language?, 2017) This would help to maximize clarity, create a motivation for the reader, while

ensuring that the call to action does not create an atmosphere of suspicion that the information itself may be suspect.

Knowing Where and When to Use Rhetorical Terms

While limiting rhetoric is helpful in preserving the value of information being communicated, it is also import for authors to carefully consider when and where such language is called for.

One of the most important factors in authoring content has always been to approach the audience in a familiar way by studying their beliefs, habits, patterns, preferences, and education level. My suggestion toward understanding where rhetoric might help the audience to connect with the call to action, is that the author of any technical writing project should engage in extensive research into the language patterns used by the average user that may utilize the writing. For example: if the author is able to determine that most users of the product will be engineers, they would follow a format using little or no rhetoric, whereas assembly instructions may be clearer to a user with a

more pedestrian understanding of the process by using short explanations before a table of instructions so that they may better understand how their labor leads to a quality product.

Rhetorical Templates for Uniform Acceptance

Finally, the creation of rhetorical document formats would greatly assist new writers or lay people with documents that follow standard practices. This would require quite a bit of careful consideration and consensus by the technical writing community to accomplish, yet the outcomes would be worth the effort to find the right balance between objectivity, presentation, and motivation for a more universal and balanced approach somewhere between scientific writing and a more vibrant way of expression. For example: there may be a format where an introductory paragraph is recommended using rhetorical language to introduce a concept, followed by action steps in a more simplified way, or a format that uses short rhetorical columns to prompt the user to an action that is then written in the more simplified manner. This

would help the technical writing community to decide on the specific instances where rhetoric can best emphasize and systemize to increase flow of information, and maximize adoption by the user.

Rhetoric Can Engage and Educate

Where clarity and directness are often useful in avoiding confusion due to lengthy and ambiguous terms and winding sentences, there is a risk that this dry approach fails to draw the reader in by failing to help them understand why they might be engaging in a task or processing a piece of information. The use of Rhetorical phrases helps to liven up texts and persuade the user to engage in the recommended activity.

Yet, at the same time, there is danger in an overreliance on Rhetoric where readers may begin to feel they are being pushed to accept that information, rather than following along to accomplish a task or recognize some vital piece of information.

Instead of strict adherence to either approach to writing, there is a balance that can be struck by deciding the proper vocabulary to use, sentence structures to employ, and even specific formats to follow for specific tasks. This would allow the author to produce more lively and flexible text, while also respecting and adapting objective and factual information.

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