

The Obligations of a Tech Writer

Yes, Virginia, tech writers have obligations. A good deal of them, actually. How is it that tech writers have obligations? Well, it's from exchanges like this.

Manager: "Why didn't you fix the errors in that document?"

Non-Manager: "It's not my stuff."

Manager: "Did it go through your hands?"

Non-Manager: "Yes, but again, it's not my stuff."

Manager: "If it goes through your hands, it becomes your stuff."

A tech writer produces and presents information pertaining to a project in an understandable manner in multiple ways. Generally, the tech writer has the job because of a combination of writing ability and comprehension of technical topics, though sometimes it is simply being the only person on the project who knows that the word *there* is not a trinity.

Write Properly Everywhere

This leads to the general obligation of a tech writer: the obligation to use proper spelling, grammar, and usage in all instances with the limited exceptions of texts and tweets. A tech writer cannot be the grammar police with friends, family, and colleagues unless first being the self-grammar police. Write as I say not as I do is unacceptable.

Therefore, whether it is an email, a user manual, or a note in the lunchroom, the tech writer must ensure it is properly written. This creates excellent habits and sets an example for others. The more care taken to write even the smallest things, the more naturally it flows for large things. Even considering the exceptions for texts and tweets where less than pristine writing is acceptable, it is still a good practice for the tech writer not to fall into their particular shorthand unless necessary lest it become a bad habit.

The aspect of setting an example for others by using care in all instances is most crucial in establishing credibility and authority within projects and organizations. Anything written and seen by others is essentially a resume with the same doom factor holding for misspellings and grammar mistakes inside an organization with colleagues as it is outside an organization with prospective employers.

Look It Up!

What does all this credibility buy? It buys confidence in the tech writer who is then able to set up an "everything produced needs to go through me before it goes out" protocol with a project team. This leverages the ability of a tech writer to ensure high quality materials while giving the project team a welcome (usually) assurance that mistakes will be caught and fixed.

It also goes to the heart of the obligations of a tech writer because ensuring high quality materials whether produced individually or by others is not simply checking spelling and grammar, but also usage, names, dates, products, links, colors, logos, languages, and so on. In other words, everything.

For example, it is not only to be accurate, but also to be legal that a tech writer must verify the actual name of an external product including its proper trademark or service mark usage, if applicable. A project's head engineer can call the external product something close to its actual name, but the project's tech writer cannot play that same game of product name horseshoes.

To perform this properly, a tech writer must visit a company's website to verify a product's actual name and, while there, must also check for any usage guidelines. In the event no guidelines exist, a further check can be made using three excellent sources: (1) The company's press releases, (2) News stories about the company, and (3) The United States Patent and Trademark Office (uspto.gov).

Press releases by a company always use the proper names and trademarks because if a company does not guard its intellectual property, no one else will. News stories use them properly because they do not want to run legally afoul of the same corporate guardians. The Patent and Trademark Office is where companies register their marks (trade and service) for protection. In addition to specific company information and usage, the USPTO site has a wealth of general information concerning marks that can be invaluable to a tech writer in later instances.

What holds for external names, marks, and logos holds for internal names, marks, and logos, obligating a tech writer to be acquainted with all internal company standards. Part of this obligation may sometimes require contacting the legal department because if all else fails, the legal department knows what is, well, legal.

Other parts of the accuracy obligations are ensuring that addresses, phone numbers, and contact names are correct and accurate meaning up-to-date, and that websites and web references are functional and point to the right place. It is a lot of looking up and searching and clicking through links, and, frankly, can be tedious at times. However, these items are especially important to verify when materials have been around for a while because age definitely raises the odds of having something incorrect.

Pick A Side

Usage, with its sometimes contradictory and conflicting authorities of internal and external style guides, comprises another obligation for the tech writer. Usage includes things like time, plurals, and nomenclature. Is it 9:00am, 9AM, 9am, or 9A.M.? Does the left fielder have 109 RBI's, 109 RBIs, or the more recent redundant busting 109 RBI? Do users click a checkbox or a check box? No one else has the obligation to pick the correct one or at least the consistent one but a tech writer.

To that end, leaving aside internal style guides that rule the day, the strategy here is to be acquainted with the major external style guides and pick the one most agreeable. They include the big three of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, and *The Associated Press Stylebook* for general writing, and the *Microsoft Manual of Style* and *The IBM Style Guide* for computing terms.

Unique to government contracting, especially military contracting, there are standards known by the opening abbreviations in their names. For example, MIL-STD (pronounced Mil Standard) are the military standards that govern how to write and produce material for a project.

Ultimately, once the usage questions get settled, a tech writer must apply them throughout the materials in the same manner as ensuring addresses and websites, i.e., by looking everywhere. This brings the exercise full circle back to the original premise of a tech writer using proper spelling, grammar, and usage in all instances to get the habits ingrained now with accuracy added to the mix.

What We Do

Performing these obligations is like those commercials—it's what tech writers do. They may not result in tech writers being part of the roster for that humorous ad campaign, but be assured that the ad campaign itself relied on someone doing tech writing obligations behind the scenes to ensure that viewers laugh at the final countdown of a microwave in an office lunchroom and not at a mistake in the commercial. The same holds for what a project produces and that is why tech writers have obligations and embrace them even without the pyrotechnics, loud guitars, and deep-voiced announcer saying a memorable tagline. It's just what we do.