1.2: Ethical Stakes in Technical Writing

Ethical Stakes in Technical Writing

Having talked about what technical writing is and what it studies, I want to focus on perhaps the most important aspect of technical writing that we could possibly discuss—the ethical stakes of technical writing and communication. To examine the ethical stakes, we’re going to first define ethical stakes, then look at the way those stakes manifest in the people that use our writing, the laws and regulations that govern our writing, and finally by looking at how ethical stakes operate in institutions and organizations.

What are ethical stakes anyway?

When we talk about ethics, it is worth taking a moment to address the elephant in the room—how do we differentiate morals and ethics? Aren’t they the same thing? Why is a course on writing trying to get into moral behavior with me? Look below for my response.

Ethics are rules or regulations that govern behavior. They are usually part of a professional organization’s code of conduct, the rules that govern a particular industry or profession, or even the laws of the land. They can also extend into rules and practices in religious texts. But, in each of these cases, the key to ethics is that they are codified—they’re written down and standardized for practical application.

Morals, on the other hand, are your own internal compass of right and wrong. They are that little voice in the back of your head that tells you that eating your roommates’ donuts while they oversleep breakfast might not be the nicest thing to do. They are individualized and aren’t something you can always expect everyone to agree on. Some folks feel strongly about eating certain foods, using certain words, or doing certain things. Those feelings are part of their own moral compass and
not something open to universal application or critique.

So, when we’re doing technical writing we’re mainly concerned with discussing ethical stakes—those rules and regulations that govern what is appropriate behavior and actions in professional or organized settings. Just like with our definition of technical writing, our definition of professional or organized settings can be very broad. After all, we have to account for folks swapping recipes or swapping talent builds and folks who are passing along specs for the material tolerances of a new bridge. In each case, people are being impacted and are working with, ideally, a shared understanding of what ethical behavior is and what is expected of each participant.

Now, with that said I do want to return to morals for one moment. We aren’t going to be diving into morals much in this text, but I do want to lay out thing out very clearly—morals do matter in technical writing practice. You should stay true to your moral compass in your professional life. If something make you uneasy or feels wrong, there is a very good chance it is! Technical writing has been used for some very unsavory and downright evil activities simply due to how and where it works—in institutional settings. Just because someone you’re working with claims something is ethical and alright doesn’t make it so. Ethical codes change over time and evolve, and sometimes they’re just wrong. Use common sense and your own morals to guide you. Don’t buy into the idea that if the organization or boss says it’s alright, it’s alright.

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**Technical Writing and People**

Technical writing at its core is writing that helps people do stuff, and doing stuff involves some level of risk and responsibility. If you’re writing instructions on how to fold an origami boat, then the risk is that you may mess up a piece of paper—relatively low stakes. But, what if you’re doing something much more dangerous and involved? If you’re operating a heavy piece of farming equipment, good technical documentation could be the difference between a harvested field and a funeral service—stakes that are life or death.

Since our writing is being used to help folks do stuff, we have to always keep those folks in mind and keep in mind our impact on them. A little bit later in the text we’ll get into the business of audience analysis—understanding who we are writing to and what their needs are. Having a firm idea of who our audience is and what they are going to need from our text and what they’re already going to know is an important starting point for any good technical writing—even a good cookie recipe!

Suffice it to say for now that ethical writing regarding people hinges on matching up our text to those individuals’ needs and expectations. Good and ethical technical writing makes things easy for folks to safely carry out whatever activity the technical writing is mediating. Unethical technical writing puts up barriers for the sake of creating barriers or simply doesn’t take into account the user at all. (Often times this comes from writing for the writer and not the reader—you make choices that are easy for you, but not easy for the person using your text, a production-centered mindset that we’ll talk about later).

Unethical technical writing can be sneaky, so we have to keep an eye out for it. Sometimes you could do some of the above things without setting out to be unethical—you just aren’t thinking or you are just taking the easy way out. In other cases, you may encounter folks with an open agenda to disenfranchise or impede others through technical writing. Keep your eyes open and think about what a text looks like from multiple points of view.
Technical Writing and Laws and Regulations

Laws and regulations are a huge part of technical writing, and for good reason. Technical writing is only useful if it can be understood, and a large part of how we write is regulated with that in mind. Regulations and laws serve different purposes for technical writing, but both have ethical components that impact the way that we write and work.

Regulations and standards are one way that we impose order on the work we do. Standards can be as basic and universal as making sure that your kilogram and my kilogram are the same weight, but they can be much more idiosyncratic. For example, you have the ASTM standards for skateboard helmets that are different than the standard certification for bicycle helmets due to the different level of impact and types of impacts involved. Someone cruising on their bike is going to have a different set of impacts than someone trying to rock-to-fakie in a massive bowl; the standard recognizes that.

Standards also exist for materials that are used in construction and industry. In fact, a lot of the traditional technical writing associated with engineering came about from the process of standardization! When the steel industry, among other industries, was first coming into its own, you had a lot of mystery behind what made for good or bad steel. If one batch failed and another batch was fine, no one could be sure why that happened. Wanting to maintain consistency and avoid bad steel that could get people killed, engineers took to documenting their processes and measuring their products to develop a durable standard. All of the documentation around this crucial process was technical writing, and it was one of the ways that technical writing and engineering became closely linked.

When we write as technical writers, we have to take into account any relevant regulations and laws that might impact our practice and make changes accordingly. For example, if you’re working in a real estate setting and you’re listing a house, there are regulations from the U.S. government that you have to follow in order to have a legal listing. Let’s say the person that you’re working for wants to list their house as great for families with young kids. That’s all well and good, but it’s also illegal to put into a listing. Housing regulations prevent sellers from promoting a particular type of buyer or avoiding a particular type of buyer for their property. (Though, they haven’t always…and the impact of those past choices are still shaping where we live and who we know). If you’re writing for real estate, you simply can’t talk about the type of family/person that would be a good fit for a home in your listing; it’s against the law.

Another example of regulations coming into play would be financial products. You could be writing ad copy for a particular financial product and think, “This is such a great fund—you’ll never lose money with this!” That is great and all, but you can’t legally say that. Any type of non-guaranteed product in the financial market can’t be sold to potential buyers as risk-free when it actually isn’t. You can’t guarantee things without having a mechanism to ensure what you’re guaranteeing.

As writers, we need to be aware of the industries we are writing in and their particular rules and relevant legal regulations. Every industry will be different, but we’re required to know the rules of the road when we’re writing professionally. For example, if you’re teaching you need to have a strong understanding of FERPA regulations. If you’re a nurse or medical professional, you need to understand how HIPAA works and what your employer interprets as a violation. (And yes, each of these rules are open to interpretation by specific employers). If you don’t make yourself aware of these rules and regulations, you risk opening up your employer or yourself to legal action or fines while simultaneously sharing private information without permission, something that often has serious personal consequences.

Now, some of these regulations and laws may seem burdensome. Sometimes they can be burdensome. But, they are in place for a reason. FERPA exists so that your grades and records are protected. Does it make sharing information
about grades more difficult? Yes, yes it does. But, that is the price that we pay to make sure your educational records are
safe. Privacy and information security aren’t free or automatic. As you work through writing that has burdensome legal
regulations around it, try to keep in mind that the extra writing you’re doing does have a purpose and that in fulfilling
your legal and ethical duties you’re likely making the world a safer or better place for the folks being protected by the
regulations and laws you’re following.

Technical Writing and Organizations

When you’re writing in an organizational setting, be aware that you may have yet another level of scrutiny and regulation
put onto your work. Organizations have their own standards and their own processes to make sure that things come out
the door in a way that is consistent with their desired public-facing image. For example, you might end up using a visual
or editorial style guide when you write copy for marketing purposes to make sure that your visuals and your language
sync up with the newest campaign that your company/organization is making use of.

With that said, one thing you need to be aware of is that within organizations there can be situations where you may be
asked to cut corners or ignore ethical guidelines. You might wonder why in the world someone would create technical
writing about an unethical choice or series of actions, but the history of technical writing is littered with corporate scandals
that were unearthed via mundane technical writing. From the Ford Pinto to the Challenger explosion to the Volkswagen
Emissions Scandal, technical writing and communication goes hand in hand with unethical choices as often as it does
ethical ones. Like any tool, you can use it for good or evil.

When you’re writing in an organization, there can be enormous pressure to do what’s right by the company rather than
what’s the legal and ethical choice. As a technical writer, and as an individual, it is up to you to make the right choice in
these situations. History is full of folks that said, “Okay, I’ll do it,” in the face of an unethical ask. Be one of the folks that
say no. They sleep better at night.

Section Break - Ethics in Technical Writing

1. What examples of ethical codes exist in your college experience? What organizations do you belong to or know of
   that have ethical codes?
2. How do ethical codes shape our behavior as professionals?
3. What types of writing do you think are the most sensitive and in need of the most ethical guidance?
4. Many educational institutions have ethical rules governing plagiarism, write your own version for your classroom in
   your own language.