Answers to Questions about Publishing in *Technical Communication*
by Sam Dragga
Editor, *Technical Communication*

What kinds of research does Technical Communication publish?

STC's quarterly research journal focuses on the practical application of studies in technical communication (i.e., research that influences the teaching and practice of the field). It publishes five kinds of articles:

- Applied research—reports of practically relevant (empirical or analytical) research
- Applied theory—original contributions to technical communication theory
- Case history—reports on solutions to technical communication problems
- Tutorial—instructions on processes or procedures that respond to new developments, insights, laws, standards, requirements, or technologies
- Bibliography—reviews of relevant research or bibliographic essays

Of the five, the great majority of submissions (and published articles) are in the category of Applied Research. From time to time, I receive manuscripts that are Applied Theory, Case History, or Bibliography. Tutorials are rarely submitted.

Applied Research is the kind of project that scholars in the field typically undertake and regularly read. It's thus the easiest manuscript to submit because it doesn't involve a lot of explanation or justification to the editor or to reviewers: it's a familiar kind of manuscript.

If your manuscript is in one of the other four categories, you would be astute to write to the journal editor and inquire about receptivity to your project. This could be a brief message: for example, "I'm working on a review of the existing research on safety communication in the automotive industry. I am examining studies published from 2000 to 2020. Would you be interested in publishing a manuscript on this topic?" Writing to the editor brings your project to the editor's attention and encourages early thinking about potential reviewers. In writing atypical manuscripts, you might also include a justification for the merits of the research project in your introduction: that is, emphasize why your case study or research review or tutorial is necessary and timely.

Also important is that articles must have implications for the practice of the field. If a manuscript, for example, is aimed exclusively at the academic classroom, I encourage authors to include implications for industry training. If a revision of this kind proves inappropriate or impossible, I would advise the authors that their manuscript is better suited for a journal like *Technical Communication Quarterly*, which is published by the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing.

How do I contribute to book reviews?

Technical Communication also publishes about 20 book reviews in each issue (more than any other journal in the field). These are brief reviews of about 500 words. If you are interested in serving as a book reviewer, write to <u>tceditor@stc.org</u> and I'll put you in touch

with the book review editor, Jackie Damrau. She will let you know which books are available from publishers for review and obtain a free copy of the book for you. Or, if you have a book you would like to review, you could discuss that possibility.

Writing book reviews develops a vital skill for scholars. In your research manuscripts, you will have to assess the merits and influence of pertinent books, discuss their methods and findings, explain possible applications, identify deficiencies, propose possible corrections, and offer directions for subsequent studies. All of this is available for practice in the writing of a book review.

What is Recent & Relevant? How do I contribute to this section?

Recent & Relevant is a section of the journal published only in its digital edition. R&R offers 100-word summaries of articles published in other journals in the field that might be of interest to practitioners and academics. If you are interested in joining the team of journal monitors, write to tceditor@stc.org and I'll put you in touch with Sean Herring, the editor of Recent & Relevant. He will assign you one or more journals to track, and you would write summaries of the pertinent articles.

Serving as a journal monitor is a great way to immerse yourself in the research of the field and observe the wide variety of quantitative and qualitative inquiry that is characteristic of studies in technical communication. This monitoring and summarizing of published research will cultivate a skill that will be important to you in writing journal articles about your research: that is, every journal article you write will likely include a key section that explains how your research project emerges from or builds on existing studies.

How do I serve as a manuscript reviewer?

If you are willing to serve as a reviewer of manuscripts submitted to the journal, please e-mail a résumé listing your education and experience (including pertinent publications or presentations) to tceditor@stc.org and specify the topics on which you could offer your wisdom and advice.

As a manuscript reviewer, you would be one of three who anonymously assess a manuscript and offer your comments and advice to the author(s). The journal offers a list of questions (see https://www.stc.org/techcomm/instructions-for-authors/) to guide your evaluation. You could address these critera point by point or offer a summary of your impressions. You might also choose to annotate the manuscript during your reading, identifying passages that are especially interesting or impressive or that appear unclear or incomplete and merit revision. You won't be expected to edit the manuscript but might choose to note frequently occurring errors.

After I have received all three reviews and compiled the comments in a report to the author, I share the reviews with all the reviewers so that you all know what each other is thinking and you all know the advice about revision that the author has been given. This sharing of reviews is often instructive for the reviewers as it offers the opportunity to perceive the manuscript from a different perspective: for example, you noted a problematic passage that the others overlooked (or vice versa) or all of you offered essentially the same advice about the

manuscript's illustrations. The insights you acquire by comparing/contrasting all the reviews will make you a better reviewer.

Serving as reviewer is a challenging and rewarding experience. It allows you to engage with productive scholars in the field to bring important research from manuscript to published journal article, while making sure it is as lucid and readable as it is credible and noteworthy.

Why is publishing in Technical Communication important?

I think *Technical Communication* encourages the academic and practitioner sides of the field to communicate with each other, support each other, nurture each other. Every article in the journal emphasizes implications for practitioners as well as offering insights for research and teaching. STC's journal thus allows scholars to cultivate their relationship with the practice of the field in business, industry, government, and nonprofit organizations and to develop curricula and programs that incorporate insights from this relationship.

And because STC is international in scope, the journal encourages a worldwide vision of the field as well as sensitivity to the intercultural implications of the research it publishes.

I think the academic-practitioner focus of *Technical Communication* encourages faculty to locate intersections for their teaching, research, and academic programs with local practices of technical communication in business, industry, government, and nonprofit organizations (e.g., guest speakers, internships, advisory boards). The journal offers a continuing visible reminder of the field's foundations in practice. It allows faculty (especially tenure-track faculty) to justify the pursuit of applied research because a prominent journal in the field considers it important and essential. And again the international scope of *Technical Communication* encourages faculty and programs to incorporate intercultural teaching/learning opportunities as vital components of a thoroughgoing education in the field.

Technical Communication is also still published by its sponsoring professional association. This allows us to support a human-centered submission process for everything we publish— articles, book reviews, and article abstracts. Authors submitting manuscripts for articles, for example, e-mail a message with the manuscript attached to tceditor@stc.org and I answer as soon as I check my incoming messages (I check several times a day). I also solicit reviewers and manage the review process through the exchange of individualized e-mail messages. The journal is thus resisting the growing inclination by corporate publishers of scores of journals to standardize and automatize the submission and review process. I think that authors and reviewers (who contribute their ideas to the journal without compensation) deserve this dignified and individualized recognition of their contribution to the conversation of the field.

What education and experience prepared you for editing a journal?

I am a first-generation college student with a B.A. in English. My degree and previous experience as the editor of my high school newspaper were my credentials for getting a job as the corporate newsletter editor for a regional chain of department stores in Ohio. In this job I was writing all kinds of news articles, from employee-of-the-month stories to explanations of store policies, medical insurance benefits, and annual inventory procedures. This experience cultivated my interest in technical communication. I later

received my M.A. and Ph.D. from Ohio University, focusing my studies on the teaching of writing.

I thereafter served as a professor of technical communication at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas for 25 years. During that time I guest edited two issues of *Technical Communication Quarterly* (on ethics and on program location) and served as series editor of the Allyn & Bacon Series in Technical Communication (19 titles). I also published several books as well as journal articles on professional ethics, information design, and intercultural communication. I served as president of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (1997-1999) and as chair of the Department of English at Texas Tech University (2002-2012).

This mix of education and experience in writing and editing as well as in managing people and projects provided the foundation for taking on the job as editor of STC's research journal.

What is a typical day of duties as editor of a journal?

Every day is a little different, but any or all of the following might occur:

- Authors submit manuscripts
- Reviewers submit their comments on manuscripts
- Authors submit revised manuscripts in response to comments from reviewers
- Prospective authors make inquiries about the journal or ideas for manuscripts
- STC officials make inquiries or offer ideas about the journal or the journal's website
- Guest editors of special issues raise questions about their duties or editorial processes
- Readers raise questions about the journal or specific articles
- The copyeditor submits the copyedited manuscript for the next issue
- The publisher submits page proofs of the next issue

I manage a lot of e-mail correspondence related to all of the above. For example, if a manuscript is submitted, I e-mail the author to acknowledge receipt. I check the manuscript for anything that might identify the author and delete all identifying information from the text or the properties of the file itself. I identify three individuals who would be qualified to serve as reviewers for this manuscript and e-mail each to inquire about their willingness to serve as reviewers. If they are willing, I e-mail each a copy of the anonymized manuscript and a copy of the reviewer guidelines (i.e., the criteria for evaluation of manuscripts). After reviews are submitted, I summarize the comments of the reviewers and report to the author and to the reviewers on the disposition of the manuscript: accept, reject, or revise and resubmit. And I try to accomplish this review process within 30 days of receipt of the manuscript while making sure that authors and reviewers operate in a cordial and cooperative (but anonymous) relationship.

I perceive the job of journal editor as all about helping authors to do exceptional research and sharing that exceptional research with readers. I am thus especially gratified every time that authors take the comments of the reviewers and submit a revised manuscript

that is obviously superior to the original version: it demonstrates that the editorial process makes for better ideas, better reading, and ultimately better teaching and practice.

How are research journals changing?

First, the growing availability of research without subscribing to a journal or joining a professional association is encouraging journals to make more of their materials available at no cost.

Second, the great majority of the contributing authors to *Technical Communication* are from the US, but I anticipate this will change with the growing internationalization and worldwide online access of academic programs in the field.

Third, as more and more journals publish entirely online (*Technical Communication* still also publishes a paper edition of each issue), I anticipate more integration in articles of audio/video materials and more attention to accessibility issues.

Fourth, the growing internationalization of technical communication makes necessary the availability of articles in multiple languages. For example, articles in *Technical Communication* about usability testing practices in Mexico might be published in English (as the journal's official language) but also in Spanish. I think this multilingual publishing is especially important if articles address research that involves human subjects: these articles ought to be published in English and in the language of the human subjects.

Of course, academic programs and industry training will have to fortify their instruction in audio/video communication, universal design, and translation and localization. Scholars will also have to develop their abilities to publish multimedia and multilingual manuscripts.

What is your advice for prospective authors, editors, and reviewers?

I subscribe to several journals and read widely, including STC's monthly magazine, *Intercom*. Professional conferences such as the annual STC Summit are also important to keep up with the newest thinking and technologies in the field.

In addition, I would advise attention to three proficiencies:

- Media proficiency: skill in creating audio/video materials as well as written materials
- Accessibility proficiency: ability to make materials accessible to their audiences regardless of ability/disability
- Language proficiency: capacity for eloquence in at least two languages

These three abilities will be neither optional nor avoidable for productive scholars in technical communication, but determiners of influence, reputation, and success.

I would also encourage getting familiar with *The Chicago Manual of Style*: it has lots of information about publishing processes as well as writing and editing practices. A free 30-day trial of the online version is available at http://press-booksweb.uchicago.edu/MOSSSF/FreeTrial.aspx.