Certification and STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator:

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get certified

What You Need to Know

take the exam online

By LIZ POHLAND | *STC Director of Communications and Senior Member* and CHRIS LYONS | *STC Executive Director*

A GUIDE FOR THOSE CONSIDERING CERTIFICATION, this article explains the purpose of certification programs, compares certification with other types of credentialing, and identifies reasons technical communicators should consider certifying as CPTCs.
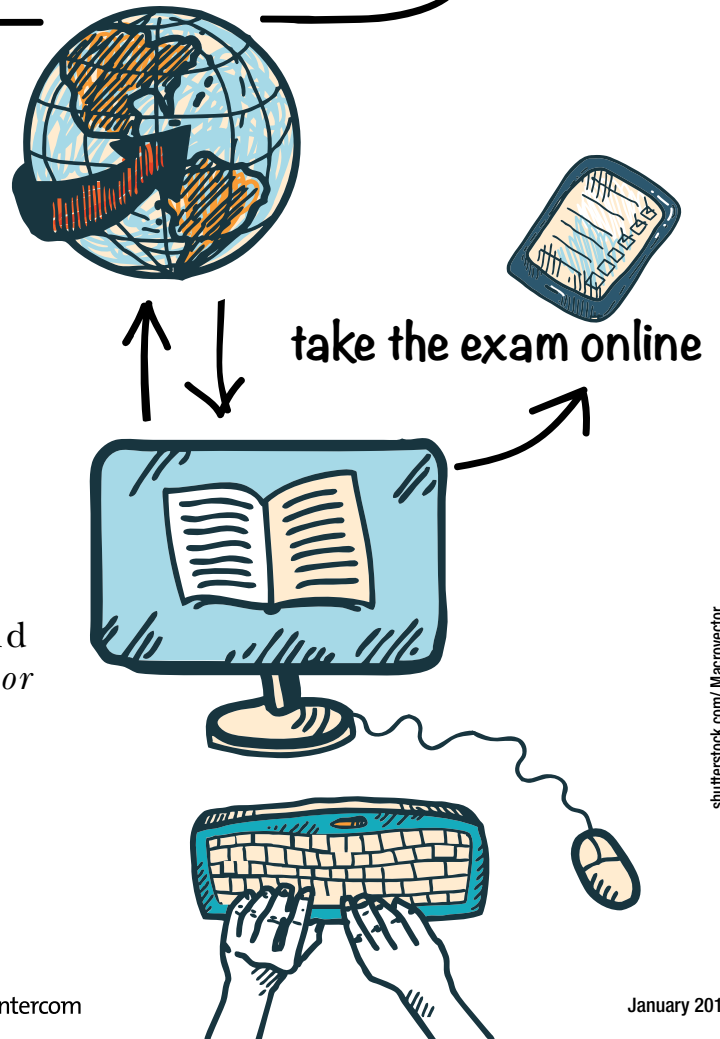
What Is Certification and Why Do Organizations Certify?

Any organization can consider creating a certification program for a particular skill or knowledge of an industry or field. Organizations may consider a certification program if: 1) they have a measurable business need to formally validate an individual's knowledge or skill in a particular product or content area; 2) there are no tests or credentials available from other organizations to measure the same level of performance on similar content or products; and 3) verifying a minimum performance capability of an individual is critical to the job (e.g., for safety, health, environmental, or other risk-related concerns).

One of the tasks in designing a certification program is to find a valid driver—a problem worth solving. The first reason most organizations certify focuses on recognizing a professional's accomplishments and improving work processes. Organizations certify individuals to protect the public, confirming that practitioners have or can get the knowledge and skills required to do their jobs safely, efficiently, and effectively. They also certify to validate or enhance the stature of a role or position, to promote continuous improvement, to increase productivity, and to maintain skills and knowledge. Hiring organizations want a certified workforce so they can attract and retain competent staff, establish uniform performance standards to rapidly deploy workers, raise the level of core competencies, create multidisciplinary jobs, and comply with local and international standards.

Since professional certification confirms or validates knowledge or performance capability, it is important that the certifying organization also be recognized as an appropriate body to determine and grant professional certification. This body is often leading or generally recognized and active organizations for professionals in a field. A professional certification created by an individual, an unknown association, or just an organized group would lack credibility.

The Society for Technical Communication launched a certification program for technical communicators in 2011. The goal behind the program was to create preference in the marketplace for certified technical communicators and to validate efforts in learning core skills, best practices, and specific industry standards. STC believes that certification is a powerful tool for driving market recognition and adoption of an essential skill set.

Per a report written in June 2009 titled "STC Certification Drivers," the STC Certification Task Force at the time identified driving factors for a certification program for technical communicators:

▸ Establish uniform worldwide performance standards.
▸ Increase employability and salary of certified practitioners.
▸ Satisfy employer expectations.
▸ Reduce risk for employers.

Definitions of Credentials

The terms *certification*, *licensure*, *standardization*, *accreditation*, and *certificate* are sometimes used interchangeably in the vernacular, but there are important distinctions between the definitions of each type of credential.

Certification is a voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency or association grants recognition to individuals who have met certain predetermined qualifications of professional competence specified by that agency or association upon an assessment. Such qualifications may include acceptable performance on a qualifying examination and/or completion of some specified amount or type of work experience in the field. Examples of certifications include STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator, the American Medical Writers Association's Certified Medical Writer, or the Project Management Institute's Project Management Professional.

Licensure is the process by which a government agency grants permission to individuals to engage in a given profession or occupation by certifying that those licensed have attained the minimal degree of competency necessary to ensure reasonable protection of the public's health, safety, and welfare. Licenses are usually justified to regulate an activity whose incompetent execution would be a threat to the public, such as with conducting surgery or driving motor vehicles. Examples of workers who need licenses to do their work include board certified doctors, lawyers who have been admitted to the bar, commercial licensed truck drivers, and airline plane captains.

Standardization is the process by which a product or service is assessed against standards and specifications, such as the Underwriters' Laboratory seal on electrical fixtures or self audits done by companies that want to show compliance to national or international standards,

Definitions in a Nutshell

▸ Certification, licensure, and certificates are for individuals.
▸ Certification is a voluntarily earned designation bestowed by a recognized organization or authority to validate an individual's qualifications to perform a job or task.
▸ Licensure is a mandatory restriction by law for a professional activity and the use of an occupational title.
▸ Standardization is directed toward products or processes.
▸ Accreditation is third-party validation of entire organizations or programs.
▸ Certificates confirm an individual's acceptable completion of a course or a program of study.

such as American National Standards Institute guidelines and ISO 9000 standards (ASAE 1987).

Accreditation is the process whereby an accrediting body grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or specialized program of study having met certain established qualifications or standards as determined through initial and periodic evaluations. For example, engineering and business programs are accredited by specialized organizations that have established performance standards for academic programs in the field.

Certificates are probably the most commonly confused with certification, but they are very different. An easy rule of thumb is a certificate recognizes completion of a defined program of study or a course and recognize completion of specific learning outcomes provided by instruction and training. Certifications award designations to recognize professional achievements from knowledge, skills, and competencies previously acquired. Examples of certificates include short-term programs of study—such as the certificate programs offered by STC and private training and development organizations like Watermark Learning's Agile Certificate (see *www.watermarklearning.com/certification/agile/academic/agile-certificates.php*)—and programs of study involving several courses—such as certificate programs in technical communication offered by the continuing education units of many colleges and universities (see University of Michigan's School of Public Health Certificate Programs, *https://sph.umich.edu/academics/programs-degrees/certificates.html*).

STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator (CPTC)

STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator program reopened in December 2015 (*www.stc.org/education/certification/certification-main*). The re-engineered program is a three-tiered professional certification: Foundation, Practitioner, and Expert.

▸ The **Foundation-level Professional Certification** focuses on knowledge of the field. To achieve the Certified Professional Technical Communicator—Foundation designation, applicants must demonstrate

knowledge and understanding of best practices in technical communication by passing an exam. Visit *http://www.apmg-international.com/en/qualifications/CPTC/CPTC.aspx* to learn more about the exam.

▸ The **Practitioner-level Professional Certification** will demonstrate mastery of applying best practices and leading others in their use. The achievement of the Certified Professional Technical Communicator—Practitioner designation will likely be a test and an evaluation of work product(s).

▸ The **Expert-level Professional Certification** requirements will be similar to the CPTC program launched in 2012, requiring a set of work products and subject matter expert interviews.

Why Should a Technical Communicator Pursue Certification?

The chief benefit of certification is simple: A certification program creates a preference in the job market for people who have taken the time to invest in themselves—in their skills and experience. For individuals in particular, becoming certified can be invaluable because it provides proof of your abilities, a robust understanding of the knowledge and specialized skills that are necessary to perform with a high degree of competence in a field, and a continuing process for remaining relevant in the field. In every profession, professional certification helps employee, employer, and the consumer.

Employees benefit from professional certification in several ways:

1. *Validation of an employee's skills and knowledge by a third party.* In the case of the Certified Professional Technical Communicator credential, STC provides that validation. Additionally, STC is working with a vendor whose accreditation processes follow ISO standards. For the employee, STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator certification, with accompanying requirements for continuing education, is a professional milestone that carries weight and credibility among peers, clients, and organizational leaders.

2. *Differentiation from others in the marketplace and the ability to command higher pay.* Professional certification is an important credential on a résumé and provides evidence of qualifications. It denotes a level of competency and is an indicator of commitment and quality performance and output. For those not looking for jobs, obtaining certification may be a requirement for advancement or a way of standing out from peers or competitors and commanding higher pay or more responsibilities.

3. *Engagement and commitment to the field.* On a personal level, the certification process and requirement for annual training forces the practitioner to stay current, work on multiple types of jobs, learn new skills, and network with peers.

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Technical Communicator
CPTC™
EXPERT

CERTIFIED PROFESSIONAL
Technical Communicator
CPTC™
PRACTITIONER

CERTIFIED PROFESSIONAL
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Employers also benefit from professional certification.

1. *Validation of an employee's skills and knowledge by a third party.* Professional certification provides a quality marker that helps an employer gauge the effectiveness and qualifications of a potential hire. It reduces risk and simplifies the search through validation of knowledge and by providing a hiring baseline. When professional certification is a requirement in a job posting, it greatly focuses the candidate pool. Since the employer is depending on an independent validation to verify a candidate's skill, it is important that the certification is granted by an established and credible organization such as STC.

2. *Differentiation from others in the workforce.* Employers want their hires to stay current and continue to grow in the profession. Professional certification programs and their related continuing education requirements provide milestones for employees and, after completing a certification qualification, remain a driver of continuing education

Benefits of certification include:

Validated Experience: Confirm your experience and competency through certification.

Professional Development: Add certification to your career development plan and distinguish yourself from your peers.

Leadership Recognition: Show employers and colleagues that you are committed to establishing global performance standards for the profession.

Professional Status: Join an elite group of CPTC-certified professionals who have demonstrated their knowledge and proficiency.

Portable Career Credential: Take your CPTC certification with you to new jobs and enhance your employability.

Personal Achievement: Gain confidence in your knowledge and skill and achieve a professional and personal goal.

and training. Employers can use achievement of professional certification as evidence for advancement or pay increases as well.

3. *Engagement and commitment to the field <u>and</u> the business.* Certified professionals with proven knowledge and competency will contribute more to an organization. They may be faster or more accurate workers, and they may be more creative or insightful in solving related business problems. And certified employees provide evidence that an organization's technical communication team is more qualified than that of its competitors.

With certified professionals in the workforce, the consumer is better off as well. Knowledgeable workers result in better communications: instructions are more easily understood, warnings are relayed properly, descriptions are complete, content can be reused, and the device used to access the content doesn't limit the user. For technical communicators, professional certification sets a standard for skills, knowledge, and performance across the field of content work and information products. Ultimately, developing a well-thought-out certification program helps an organization's employees, customers, and members advance the organization's interests, as well as their own. It is arguably the best way to create confidence in the marketplace.

The Society for Technical Communication is fulfilling one of its mandates as an association by creating and sponsoring professional certification for technical communicators. We hope all of our members, academics, students, and other practitioners in the field take advantage of this program. ℹ️

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Certified Professional Technical Communicator:
The Foundation Exam and Its Nine Areas of Competency

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Project Planning ▸ Project Analysis ▸ Content Development ▸ Organizational Design ▸ Written Communication ▸ Visual Communication ▸ Reviewing and Editing ▸ Content Management ▸ Production and Delivery

THE FOUNDATION LEVEL of STC's professional certification addresses key terminology, facts, concepts, and techniques in nine areas of disciplinary expertise. These areas encompass a broad range of processes, practices, strategies, and roles that comprise the work of technical communicators and teams they serve on and manage. Foundation-level professional certification in technical communication is designed for entry-level individuals who are involved in technical communication and informational projects or products, who possess working knowledge of the key principles of the profession, and who understand the basic terminology used and theories behind specific practices.

Foundation certification is required to progress to higher tiers. Practitioner and Expert-level certifications will be available in the future.

What are the nine areas?

The nine areas of professional certification in technical communication include: project planning, project analysis, content development, organizational design, written communication, visual communication, reviewing and editing, content management, and production and delivery.

How were they created?

These certification categories build on the previous research and work of task forces and committees, including the STC Certification Commission. The effort included a comprehensive review of the Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) content to determine areas of expertise within the profession. As a collective and collaborative knowledge resource drawing from nearly 600 content topics, it represents a breadth of technical communication knowledge.

A job task analysis survey of STC members was also developed and conducted by an external entity to reach a broader profile of professionals in technical communication. Drawing from the results of the TCBOK comprehensive content review, the survey asked participants to rank the importance of knowledge, skills, and abilities related to process management, researching, design, development, review, and production. It also focused on tasks, importance, and frequencies related to their job responsibilities and knowledge of the profession.

In addition, several panels of subject matter experts were involved throughout the process tasked with the responsibility to review and comment on content related to the nine categories. As a final task, a group of subject matter experts were involved with updating and writing objectives for each category.

What does each area measure?

Project Planning

Project planning focuses on the work involved in planning and managing technical communication work teams and documents through a lifecycle process. It includes process planning, goal setting, progress tracking, and strategic planning activities.

Project Analysis

Project analysis involves the work of identifying readers and document contexts, including the development of reader profiles. This includes identifying types of audiences, users, readers, and their preferences regarding document use and readability. It also focuses on the analysis of document contexts, including working in global contexts and rhetorical situations.

Content Development

This category focuses on the development of content and technical information products. It addresses technical genres, their content, and use, including: memos, technical descriptions and specifications, instructional content, proposals, activity or status reports, and analytical reports. It also focuses on researching, including finding source materials, defining the scope of research questions and methods, and documenting sources and intellectual property concerns.

Organizational Design

Organizational design focuses on guidelines and techniques for organizing and drafting technical documents. It covers organizational patterns and rhetorical moves for introductions and conclusions to technical reports, as well as patterns for specific technical genres including memos, technical descriptions and specifications,

instructional content, proposals, activity or status reports, and analytical reports.

Written Communication

Written communication covers general guidelines for composing content and communicating in written and electronic forms. It covers writing style, persuasion, tone, and general readability. It includes techniques for writing sentences and paragraphs for both print and electronic documents, and in global contexts.

Visual Communication

This area focuses on general visual communication principles and practices, including using graphics, data displays and other kinds of information graphics, such as bar charts, line graphics, tables, pie charts, flow charts, etc. It covers the use of design principles, such as balance, alignment, grouping, consistency, and contrast. It also addresses the use of visual information and related technologies when giving presentations.

Reviewing and Editing

This category addresses reviewing and editing processes and guidelines, and general usability. It encompasses the various levels of editing, including revising, substantive editing, copyediting, and proofreading. Additionally, it covers common grammatical and mechanical errors.

Content Management

This area focuses on managing content of information products, as well as the management of information development teams. It addresses Web content development, including the basic features of Web sites and general guidelines for developing Web-based content. It also covers the uses of social networks, wikis, blogs, microblogs, videos, and podcasts in working settings. From a teaming standpoint, it covers the roles and practices for managing content and roles across a work team.

Production and Delivery

This category focuses on the production and delivery of information products, specifically how project outcomes relate to and inform the development of final production deliverables. It also addresses the importance of setting objectives for final deliverables and using them to measure effectiveness and outcomes of technical information products.

What is the exam format?

The Foundation-level Certified Professional Technical Communicator exam covers each of the nine areas and is based on content from the 5th edition of *Technical Communication Today*, by Richard Johnson-Sheehan (*www.mypearsonstore.com*, ISBN–10:0134419391). Additionally, the Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) content (*www.tcbok.org*) is an informative secondary source for the exam.

The purpose of the Foundation qualification is to measure whether a candidate has sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the technical communication text

to act as an informed member of a technical writing or a technical communication team within their professional work or in their organization.

The Foundation exam format is:
- 40 minutes
- 50 multiple choice questions
- 70% pass mark
- Closed book

What are the continuing education requirements?

Continuing education requirements include a wide range of STC-related activities, including attending STC Summit sessions, webinars, and other educational offerings, as well as successful completion of college accredited courses related specifically to technical communication.

Currently, continuing education points may be obtained the following ways:

Event	Points
STC Annual Membership (any type for Foundation certificants)	2
STC Recorded Webinar (self-study)	1
STC Live Educational Webinar (free, sponsored, and community webinars excluded)	2
STC Online Courses	6
STC Summit Full-Day Pre-Conference Course	6
STC Summit Half-Day Pre-Conference Course	3
STC Virtual Summit	4
STC Annual Summit	8
Begin and complete a college accredited course related to the Technical Communication field*	8 points per 3 college credit course

* transcript must be submitted to and reviewed by STC

As the Foundation program matures, this list will expand to include other activities including non-STC activities hosted by other associations or institutions.

Further Information

You can register to take the Foundation-level Certified Professional Technical Communicator exam by visiting STC's website at *www.stc.org/education/certification/certification-main*. STC members can sit the exam at a discounted price by entering their valid STC member ID at the time of registering for the exam. If you have additional questions about the exam or STC's certification, please visit *www.stc.org/education/certification/certification-main* or email *stc@stc.org*. ∎

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