

# Power and legitimacy in technical communication

## Volume 1 — The Historical and Contemporary Struggle for Professional Status

Edited by **Teresa Kynell-Hunt** and **Gerald J Savage**

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Reviewed by **Gavin Ireland MISTC**

Along with other organisations, the ISTC has been struggling to obtain industry-wide recognition for technical communicators since long before I entered the field. In fact, the struggle dates back at least as far as when Professor Kapp formed the Presentation of Technical Information Group (a predecessor of the ISTC) in 1948. Now, in the next millennium, I find it has become my responsibility; but where to start? That is the question that this book asks and it suggests that we begin with our history and the history of bodies that have already achieved professional status.

Part 1 (Historical Roots of the Struggle for Status) goes back to the very early days of technical communication in America. It looks at the first attempts to patent and copyright instructions and designs, and the difficulties encountered. It goes on to discuss Dr Rudolph Flesch and his principles of scientific rhetoric, which took ancient Greek principles of rhetoric and updated them with modern and scientific methods. Of course, it would be difficult to mention Dr Flesch without mentioning his readability formula; this part describes how the formula came into being and the research used to develop it. Part 1 ends with a discussion of how engineers achieved professional status and how technical communicators can learn from that achievement.

Part 2 (The Contemporary Struggle for Status) includes a look at what technical communication societies (primarily the STC but the ISTC gets the occasional mention too) have tried and are currently trying to achieve in the struggle for status. In 'Inside Out/Outside In', George Hayhoe discusses the differences between technical communicators and teachers of technical communication, and considers how those differences must be overcome if we are ever to achieve professional status. He gives a list of ten steps for technical

communicators and teachers to use to build the respect and cooperation that we need. I found this list very practical and insightful, and I intend to use some of it myself.

Gerald Savage concludes this part of the book with a long and practical discussion of the issues raised when trying to professionalise technical communication. I found his observation that, for emerging professions, success in the market place 'involves more than simply offering a service that customers are willing to buy ... [there is a need to] control the market place by establishing certification or licensing standards ...' particularly interesting as, not only do all established professions in the UK already do this, but Tekom has also just begun to do it for technical communication in Germany. The ISTC itself spent a lot of time developing vocational standards that, unfortunately, have yet to be accepted.

Part 3 (Envisioning Empowered Practice for Technical Communication) begins by describing 'the author' and discussing the relevance of communication theory. After thoroughly dissecting the theory, the conclusion is that technical communicators need to be 'armed' with technical knowledge as well as communication theory. In a section entitled 'The Technical Communicator as Author?', the book suggests that technical communicators were given the title technical author in an attempt to improve the professional standing of the role. It then goes on to discuss how authorship and professional status may be an unfair burden to insist on. The writer of this section seems to have decided that the technical communicator is a technical author by another name, whilst we in the ISTC consider the term 'technical communicator' to encompass a broad range of related trades including technical authors. This point makes much of the content only relevant to someone with the same opinion as the writer.

The conclusion of the book states that technical communication is in an 'odd situation, arising as a profession during the very era in which traditional professions find themselves endangered.' and I have to agree. I take this to mean that we need to be more flexible than those traditional professions and find our own way to professional status, rather than seeking to follow those traditional professions.

Overall, I found this book to be a little confused. It discusses in some detail how industry and academe (the world of learning, teaching and research) must be as one for the advancement of professional status, so you would think that the target audience was both industry and academe. However, even though I consider myself an articulate and fairly well educated 'industry' type, I found the book very difficult to read. In fact, I found myself constantly dipping into my reference library to decipher what I had just read.

That said, the book does include some very valid points. As President of the ISTC, I found it useful and thought-provoking. I think that it is ideally suited to academics, council members in professional associations and technical communicators who have a specific interest in professional status. **C**

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