

## **Selected Bibliography for Technical Communication Professionals: Gender, Communication Strategies, and Audience Analysis**

Gail Lippincott

Senior member, STC Orlando Chapter

PhD candidate, University of Minnesota

lipp0015@tc.umn.edu

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Effective technical communication relies on an analysis of the intended audience. If such an analysis includes the demographics of an audience, it is often primarily concerned with the level of the readers' knowledge or how much the readers need to know in order to complete a task. Rarely is the gender of the audience taken into consideration, ignoring several decades of research on the different communication styles used and preferred by women and men. When gender is considered, writers often rely on prescriptive guidelines to avoid sexist language or, more positively, to use inclusive language to eliminate bias from their writing.

If over half of the STC membership is female, however, and if STC membership is a representative sample of technical communicators, then over half of the potential users of the profession's research are women; doesn't it make sense that studies addressing or incorporating gender would be important to all writers and readers? As Jo Allen points out, "No study has investigated gender-based attitudes and behaviors within the technical communication profession" (376). This serious lack is due to

a discomfort with the kinds of research and assumptions generated by questions about gender differences. In our fears of being perceived as sexist, we have simply ignored a vast potential for research. Further, however, we have failed to undertake an important facet of industry-watching; we have failed to study our own industry for the effects of a more diverse work group, one composed of more women than in previous decades. And we have failed to incorporate ideas and the acknowledgements of the diverse work group in our classrooms. (372)

Promising signs of progress are beginning to remedy these failures. The significant amount of gender research conducted in many disciplines beginning in the late 1980s is beginning to trickle into technical communication research and its subsequent articles; unfortunately most of these published articles are rather scholarly, and the theoretical apparatus does not often easily translate to immediate application in the workplace. Interestingly, a number of the articles focus on historical writing by women, the first step in recovering women's voices and at the same time a broadening of our notion of what constitutes technical and scientific writing. Furthermore, many of these articles appear in US scholarly business and technical communication journals that most practitioners can not easily access. For example, my own two institutions, the Universities of Minnesota and Central Florida, do not subscribe to the *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*; its individual yearly rate of more than \$50 for four issues deters many in academia, much less practitioners, from subscribing to this important source of cutting edge research and book reviews.

This selected annotated bibliography, then, is directed towards practicing technical communicators, not necessarily academics or students, and therefore concentrates primarily on applicable articles from STC's publications, *Intercom* and *Technical Communication*. I have also included some examples of inexpensive but comprehensive handbooks available at any bookstore. An important source that I have not included, but that should not be overlooked, is the many current (but fairly expensive) technical communication textbooks as well. New and used copies are available mostly in college bookstores, but they can be ordered through any bookstore. My goal in producing this bibliography is to give the practitioner an idea of the kinds of research conducted and how the findings can be applied in the workplace. The inclusion of sometimes difficult-to-obtain scholarly journal articles points to the need for an STC-sponsored anthology containing reprinted articles on this important intersection of gender and audience analysis in technical communication.

- Allen, Jo. 1991. "Gender issues in technical communication studies: an overview of the implications for the profession, research, and pedagogy." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 5: 371-92.

Appears in special issue on gender and professional communication. Accessible article suggests that technical communicators have failed to study gender issues in their own profession because of discomfort or fear of appearing sexist. Synthesizes and analyzes research that correlates low salaries and the feminization of any field to show that the increasing numbers of women in the technical communication workplace will push this field toward a similar devaluation, with a corresponding disparity between women's and men's wages. Suggests numerous research topics on the profession as well as technical communication itself that practitioners, teachers, and researchers could pursue.

- . 1994. "Women and authority in business/technical communication scholarship: an analysis of writing features, methods, and strategies." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 3: 271-92.

Applied rhetorical analysis by a respected feminist technical communication scholar that focuses on the means by which women convey authority in their scholarly publications. Speculates that hedges may not be expressions of doubt or lack of authority suggested by early feminist researchers but instead a strategy that creates a friendly tone or atmosphere in which to express opinions. Provides pointers to other feminist scholars and research findings. Helpful bibliography.

- Barnum, Carol M., and Saul Carliner, eds. 1993. *Techniques for technical communicators*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

A collection of well-formatted and readable articles by prominent practitioners and academics in technical communication. The 12 chapters address techniques to plan, design, edit, verify, and protect information, focusing always on the analysis of an audience with a need to know. Janice Redish begins the first chapter with techniques to understand how much attention readers pay to the documents they use as well as how social conditions affect how readers interpret those documents. For each point addressed she provides information on "what the research says" and follows it with "what you can do." No mention is made of gender in any of the chapters.

- Ben-Ari, Caroline A. 1998. "Non-Sexist Writing." *Intercom* 45, no. 1: 4-7.

Easy to read article explaining how technical writers can incorporate nonsexist strategies into their writing with examples of revised sentences. Also explains the differences between gendered words and the non-gendered syllables "man" and "men," and offers substitutions for gendered words. Lists two resources: Maggio's *The Bias-Free Word Finder* (1992) and Miller and Swift's *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing* (1992) (see entries).

Bernhardt, Stephen A. 1992. "The design of sexism: the case of an Army maintenance manual." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 35: 217-21.

Compares two versions of an Army maintenance manual, separated by two decades, to assess how sexist assumptions pervade visual communication. Asserts that visual communication becomes dated more quickly than writing, but that contemporary communicators often cannot see the sexism in their own texts

Blakeslee, Ann M. 1993. "Readers and authors: fictionalized constructs or dynamic collaborations?" *Technical Communication Quarterly* 2: 23-35.

Studies how three scientists persuaded unfamiliar audiences who were possibly indifferent to their arguments by collaborating with actual audience members. This collaboration highlights the fluid boundaries between reader roles as it depicts the social interaction that influences writing.

Boiarsky, Carolyn, Barbara Northrop, Laurel Grove, Marianne Phillips, Lisa Myers, and Patricia Earnest. 1995. "Men's and women's oral communication in technical/scientific fields: results of a study." *Technical Communication* 42: 451-59.

An example of survey-based applied research in oral communication styles. One survey of 506 women and a follow-up survey of 295 people, of whom 25 were men, were analyzed. While the authors clearly state that due to sampling differences, "no formal statistical analysis was conducted to determine whether significant differences existed between the two genders" (453), the article title and all the tables clearly compare the responses of men and women. A much stronger and potentially more valuable article would focus on the authors' assertion that the surveys "indicated that women do not form a monolithic entity, rather they differ in their attitudes and perceptions of their work experiences," based on a number of demographics (454). Such findings also should be tested against more recent gender communication research.

Bosley, Deborah S. 1994. "Feminist theory, audience analysis, and verbal and visual representation in a technical communication writing task." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 3: 271-92.

Finding that "no studies concentrate specifically on the relationship between gender and audience awareness" (295), the author uses controversies over theories on gender differences in writing to test whether females or males are more likely to include audience concerns in their creation of instructions. Finds that in this test, the scores were very close, indicating the same level of audience awareness. Concludes that the context of the situation, rather than gender alone, may dictate the connectedness or "ethic of care" that theorists often ascribe to females. Suggests continued empirical research that includes gender and incorporates feminist theory.

Coney, Mary B. 1992. "Technical readers and their rhetorical roles." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 35: 58-63.

Creates an initial taxonomy of readers' roles within technical documents to account for what author terms empirical and rhetorical readers (audiences). Roles include receiver of information, user, decoder, professional colleague, and maker of meaning. Warns that audience research must not become reductive, because flexibility in categories allows for different responses necessary for effective reader participation. Does not address gender.

Dell, Sherry A. 1990. "Promoting equality of the sexes through technical writing." *Technical Communication* 37: 248-51.

Very readable essay that incorporates Edward Sapir's theory of how language reflects and creates culture to show the power of language to establish equality between women and men. Discusses the importance of promoting such equality through writing, and technical writing in particular. Asserts that promoting equality upholds the accurate and unbiased writing technical communicators strive for.

Dragga, Sam. 1996. "'Is this Ethical?'" A survey of opinion on principles and practices of document design." *Technical Communication* 43: 29-38.

Highly readable report on a survey of STC members regarding the rhetorical power of their ethical decisions in document design. Includes sex in demographics and analysis, based on published studies that indicate differences between women's and men's perception and use of visual information and their differing ethical perspectives. Concludes that levels of education and job experience do not impact ethical decisions, but that gender of writer does.

Durack, Katherine T. 1998. "Authority and audience-centered writing strategies: sexism in 19th-century sewing machine manuals." *Technical Communication* 45: 180-196.

Historical examination of technical communication designed specifically for women. Illustrates both the voice of authority and how procedures tell readers what to do rather than seek rapport. Relates the findings to modern writing, noting that if technical communicators shape texts for a particular sex, they risk reinforcing stereotypes. Distinguishes between nonsexist and gender-neutral language.

—. 1997. "Gender, technology, and the history of technical communication." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 6: 249-60.

First article in this special issue on historical contributions of women to technical communication. Balanced and user-friendly tone provides an excellent overview of research on why women are not more visible in histories of technology and technical communication. Suggests inclusive definitions that will make women's work (both writers and users) more visible, such as

reconsidering where technical writing takes place, what technology entails, and what kinds of knowledge technical writing creates or conveys.

Floreak, Michael J. 1989. "Designing for the real world: Using research to turn a 'target audience' into real people." *Technical Communication* 36: 373-81.

Provides an excellent case study of research into the analysis process of an audience not frequently discussed in technical communication: low-literate adults. Interviews with members of the target audience overturned the design team's "armchair" assumptions. The author shows the difference between "knowing about" the audience and "knowing" the audience. Does not address gender.

LaDuc, Linda, and Amanda Goldrick-Jones. 1994. "The critical eye, the gendered lens, and 'situated' insights—feminist contributions to professional communication." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 3: 245-56.

Introduction to special issue on gender and technical communication. Traces how technical communication has been called to social action by critiquing its own reliance on objectivity. Situating technical communication within a social context allows for a feminist interpretation that makes women, gender, and power visible. Invites women as well as men to "scrutinize power relations, research methods and design, daily practices, teaching, and issues of social responsibility through the lens of gender" (255).

Lay, Mary M. 1991. "Feminist theory and the redefinition of technical communication." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 5: 348-70.

Extremely readable and careful review of gender scholarship by a respected feminist technical communication scholar and teacher. Synthesizes findings on gender and various topics including communication, writing, reading, speaking and language choice, visual communication, collaboration, management, history, and case studies. Suggests a number of topics that technical communicators could investigate to make their workplaces and documents accessible to women and men.

Lippincott, Gail. 1997. "Experimenting at home: writing for the nineteenth-century domestic workplace." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 6: 365-80.

Examines selected texts by an American woman scientist in the late 19th-century to find how she displayed audience awareness for various professional and popular audiences. In particular, her texts to women about their use of domestic science and technology addressed various levels of expertise. Author suggests that modern technical communicators critique current writing for gender as well as class and nationalistic biases.

Maggio, Rosalie. 1991. *The bias-free wordfinder: a dictionary of nondiscriminatory language*. Boston: Beacon Pr.

Also published as *The dictionary of bias-free usage: a guide to nondiscriminatory language*. Phoenix: Oryx Pr. (1991). Excellent handbook that provides an easily accessible reference guide with 15,000 alternatives to nondiscriminatory language. Alphabetized entries include definitions, occupational descriptions and statistics, and key concepts that often embody sexist, racist, or other biases. Acknowledges the frustration and difficulty inherent in finding and eliminating exclusive language, but reminds writers that readers often feel hurt or left out by biased language. A must for every technical communicator's bookshelf.

—. 1997. *Talking about people: a guide to fair and accurate language*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Updates Maggio's previous books, growing from 293 to 440 pages. The older, paperback versions may be more affordable for now. This one-stop reference book includes an extensive bibliography about theory, principles, and research on the fair and accurate use of language. Provides writing guidelines and investigates special problems.

Miller, Casey, and Kate Swift. 1988. *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row.

Easy to read foundational text for understanding what constitutes sexist writing and how to eliminate it. Provides historical background and alternatives to "generic" man and pronouns, and what those changes will mean to readers. Offers often humorous explanations of why and how to incorporate parallel treatment of sex-linked descriptives of numerous words, idioms, and maxims. Highly recommend to round out the workplace reference library.

Neely, Kathryn A. 1992. "Woman as mediatrix: women as writers on science and technology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 35: 208-16.

Presents role of mediatrix for women writers in past centuries in which they structured, synthesized, and communicated scientific and technical knowledge to a variety of audiences. Describes the careers and writing of four successful women mediators in their historical contexts. Suggests that modern technical communicators broaden notions of what constitutes technical and scientific writing as well as who does it.

Sauer, Beverly A. 1994. "Sexual dynamics of the profession: articulating the *écriture masculine* of science and technology." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 3: 309-24.

Analyzes the implicit sexual imagery of a workplace text, the studgun operator's manual. Suggests that, while the manual's language assumes its readers to be "everyman," in fact there are female readers in the audience, who may negatively interpret and react to a text's language.

Questions how technical writing professionals can modify a given text to uphold the goals of non-sexist language and equal opportunity.

Schriver, Karen A. 1997. *Dynamics in Document Design*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Written in a lively, personable style that incorporates the results of years of research studies into a readable and useful reference book. Emphasizing readers' needs throughout the book, Schriver puts the research into action by stepping through real life projects, from drug education literature for teenagers to the missing components that bedevil VCR owner's manuals. She is careful to point out the effects of gender and other cultural considerations—of the readers as well as the document designers—in creating documents sensitive to readers' needs.

Every technical communicator would benefit from reading this book both to provide research to back up decisions at work as well as to increase professional knowledge. Not a textbook, *Dynamics of Document Design* constitutes a comprehensive upper-level college course that begins with the historical and professional conditions that impact how our field defines itself, provides the basis for typographical guidelines (both paper and online), and always illustrates why and how to build in user testing of documents. A comprehensive bibliography provides an education in itself.

Schwartz, Marilyn. 1995. *Guidelines for bias-free writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

This small (100 pages) handbook is readable but not as comprehensive as the Maggio books. Devotes a section each to gender; race, ethnicity, citizenship and nationality, and religion; disabilities and medical conditions; sexual orientation; and age. Provides common usage, preferred alternatives, and the reasoning behind such decisions.

Shenk, Robert. 1994. Gender bias in Naval fitness reports? A case study on gender and rhetorical credibility. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 24: 367-87.

Example of applied rhetorical analysis to evaluate gender bias and sexist assumptions in military workplace writing. Interestingly, no feminist research supports the analysis, although author argues that “on gender as on other issues” credibility can be established in many ways. Presents a balanced portrayal of the writings that constitute this “small” controversy from a previous decade without contextualizing the state of biased language (“buzz words”) analysis at the time.

Tebeaux, Elizabeth. 1990. “Toward an understanding of gender differences in written business communications: A suggested perspective for future research.” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 4 25-43.

Noting a lack of applied research in gender communications research to business and technical communication, author conducted an informal study of student writing based on the students' amount of work experience. Concludes that there are few differences based on gender alone; students with more people-related work experience displayed significantly more audience

awareness in their writing. Suggests that an androgynous style is emerging in business and technical communication, due not to gender but to workplace contexts.

Tebeaux, Elizabeth, and Mary Lay. 1992. "Images of women in technical books from the English Renaissance." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 35: 25-43.

Examines the content and style of a number of technical books written for women, by both women and men, during the English Renaissance, to trace the extensive duties women were expected to perform as well as the literacy of various audiences. Draws on modern theories of women's rhetorical and reading strategies to explain the gendered metaphors and voice used. Concludes that modern technical communicators may need to include gender considerations in their document design to accommodate increasingly diverse readers.

Wagner, Carl G. 1987. "The technical writing audience: a recent bibliography." *Technical Writing Teacher* 14: 243-63.

A useful starting point to learn about the wealth of audience analysis research to this point. Organizes over one hundred articles that address the concept of audience analysis and adaptation in technical communication into categories helpful to technical writing teachers. A number of these essays appear to adopt an informational perspective such as applying readability formulas to texts, leading Wagner to believe "that the technical writing profession still clings to old notions" in this area (246). Does not categorize any articles by gender considerations, although he does point out attention paid to the ethical considerations of audience.

Warren, Thomas L. 1993. "Three approaches to reader analysis." *Technical Communication* 40: 81-88.

Motivated by confusing approaches to reader analysis, author classifies approaches into three increasingly complex categories: demographic (based on reader's characteristics), organizational (based on reader's role and influence in workplace), and psychological (based on reader's need for information). No mention of gender is made in demographic analysis; instead, focus is on what readers already know for their jobs and their educational level to allow writer to make inferences.