

# Jill Nicholson's Technical Writing and Documentation Course

## Review by Janet Taylor

Most of you will have seen the advertisements for Jill Nicholson's course and, probably, like me wondered just how much benefit it might be to existing technical writers and aspiring technical writers. There are very few courses specifically targeting technical writing, so this one seemed to be very worthwhile—if it lived up to the promise in its title. In the interests of research I attended the course run in November 2003.

From the beginning, the course's table of contents shows the direction to be taken. Here is a random sample from the topics covered on day 1: Communication theory, Communication in the Workplace, The Plain English Concept, Writing as a Process, Writing as Problem Solving, The 10 Most Common Problems in Writing, Readability Analysis, Non-discriminatory Language, Clarity, Consistency and Cleverness, and What Makes a Technical Document Good?

Grammar is covered in some detail, but not the boring grammar of our school days. The grammar is folded into the more practical world in which we live with topics such as: Sentence Arrangement for Emphasis, Subject-verb Agreement (I didn't realise how tricky these could be!), Parallel Construction, plus a light touch on our old friend Punctuation.

For each topic, excellent examples of good and bad are supplied. The exercises are also excellent in teaching the point of the topic.

Day 2 concentrates more on the aspects of communication and starts with Audience Analysis—the questions to ask, how to develop an audience profile, and techniques for gathering information for task analysis.

These topics will be familiar to experienced technical communicators, but I found them excellent as a refresher.

Planning a Technical Document contains excellent suggestions for organizing and collecting information, from group or solo brainstorming to story boarding. Then came the 5 W's approach that you can use as a checklist to ensure your document has no shortcomings. Time allocation is another valuable tool with time proven percentages given for each phase of your documentation. In fact, this day has a lot of useful checklists as well as providing techniques and templates for different types of documents.

Depending on the type of document, the templates include the type of information you might include in an Executive Summary, Summary, Introduction, main text, Conclusion, Recommendations and Appendices. No more dithering about where to include types of text, and moving them from place to place. These templates provide very clear guidelines of what is expected in each potential section.

Day 2 concludes with Managing the Documentation Process & Usability with some more checklists to determine the objectives of each documentation phase: development, usability testing, product design cycle and comparison tests.

For those of you who have seen Jill's presentations at the ASTC(NSW)'s conferences (and the STC conferences in the US) you will know that everything that she does is practical. It is all based on her own many years experience as a technical communicator and educator.

Have you ever attended one of those ra!ra! courses where you feel so enthused that you wish to change the world overnight? Or you are so exhausted that you are sure you won't be able to use all that you learnt? This is not one of those courses. It's more like a slow release fertilizer, where concepts you learn - or were dredged up from the deep recesses of your mind - keep popping up during the weeks and months following the course - well, that is how I found it.

Jill points out that it may take three months to properly use what we have learnt and she is right. I'm still remembering things that I need to watch out for.

The course notes are extremely extensive and will be excellent reference material for the future. The classes are small, so can be molded to cater for each attendee's particular interests. On the course that I attended, there were two experienced technical communicators, a newcomer to technical communicating and an IT specialist from a non-English speaking background who wanted to improve the quality of her design specifications.

The courses are conducted at Jill's home in leafy Roseville. (The location allows Jill to run the courses at a much lower cost than from a professional training room.) You couldn't find a better location or more relaxed setting. Nor a better lunch room, as shown in the picture. In fact, one of our attendees was so relaxed that she fell asleep on the sofa at lunch time!

Did the course live up to expectations? It certainly did! I came away with much more knowledge than I expected and now feel far more confident when stating my opinions in my own work place.

*Janet Taylor has 10 years of experience as a technical communicator, first as a contractor with Aspect Computing Pty Ltd (now KAZ) and since then with an Aspect division which is now LANSA Pty Ltd. For many years prior to that Janet was an IT project leader who created all the training and documentation for the projects that she developed.*