

Accreditation

Australian Society for
Technical Communication
(NSW) Inc.



Extracted from the Westies' presentation at the 2003 Conference.

Accreditation is a complex issue that has tested members of this and other professional bodies for many years. Recently the Society of Editors posted twelve pages of lengthy consideration on the subject.

Many proposed accreditation solutions are very complex and require a lot of administration. ASTC (NSW) is not in a position to administer a complex accreditation system, so for our system to work successfully it must be simple and, to a large extent, self-administering.

The Westies group has been discussing it for a while, and we believe we have found a way to do it. It isn't perfect but it's *ours* and it's a starting point. You are welcome to add comments, vilify it or build on it. At least we now have a model.

Why do we need an accreditation system?

Technical Communication has

- Low public profile.
We are not well known as a profession. That is something we must do something about and accreditation will help us do it. Many technical communicators are not aware of ASTC and why they should be members.
- Many directions.
The profession has a broad scope and it's getting broader. As an example, consider the Collins submarine project. Documents about machinery, ventilation systems, hydraulic systems, electrical systems, electronic systems, navigation systems, weapons systems, administration, payroll, personnel and so on were all written, illustrated and published by members of our profession.
- Low membership.
When people see MASTC on your business card they will want to know what it's about. Tell them. When employers start asking for ASTC membership – or accreditation – our membership will rise. Trainers have done it, accountants have done it, and we can do it too. Every business card becomes an advertisement for the profession.
- Mixed esteem.
When I stand in the middle of a workplace I might ask myself how my qualifications stack up. Accreditation will help answer that question.

We argue that if ASTC accreditation is mentioned in CVs and business cards, the news will get around the employment industry. That will immediately lift our profile and our public image a little. Ultimately it will help people realise that a Technical Communicator is a trained and experienced professional.

Janet Taylor MASTC
President

Australian Society for Technical Communication (NSW) Inc.

If we can get it right we can make it easier for employers to find the right Technical Communicator for their vacancies. And that should make life better for everybody.

How does our accreditation system work?

- We recognise that the skills a person needs in one workplace are not necessarily useful in another.
- We require a standard that keeps people employed while being attainable by all of us.
- We recognise that experience is probably the most important asset of a technical communicator.
- We recognise that suitable training is valuable, but it is not, and can never be the arbiter of a person's fitness as a technical communicator.

The model we use is similar to many other accreditation systems. This is no accident, because we looked at many of them, particularly the model used by the National Institute of Accountants. Obviously, accreditation is only available to current financial members.

These are the same four grades of membership that most professional bodies have. We already have a grade of Student Member. What we are doing is adding the grades for practising professionals.

Student Grade

Engaged in suitable training
Wants to be a Technical Communicator
(We already have this grade)

Associate Member

Has suitable training
Has a Technical Communicator job
Has less than three years' experience

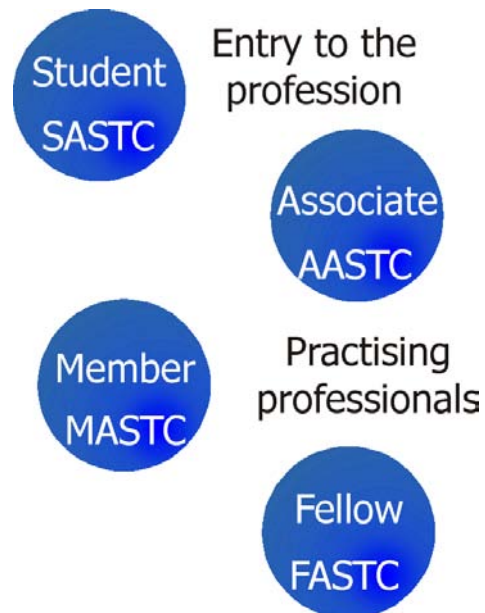
Member

Has suitable training
Has more than three years' experience

Fellow

The grade of Fellow is not granted lightly.

Has academic *and* vocational training
Has more than eight years' experience
Has three years in a leadership role
Has been a presenter at at least one ASTC annual conference



Suitable training

A lot of us have argued for some time that the ability to write isn't something you acquire in a training course, and there are many good Technical Communicators out there with no formal qualifications of any kind. However, training certainly helps, and the best writers are probably those with both training and experience-honed skills.

We recognise that training suitable for one job might be useless in another. For example, to a person who is writing a maintenance manual for a motor vehicle, a mechanic's trade certificate is more valuable than a law degree. We also recognise that there is good value in generic training such as writing, illustrating and project planning courses.

The one sticking point is that we need some sort of measure, and we're agreed that tertiary training such as a degree or diploma is often limited in value. In terms of accreditation it does only two things:

- Demonstrates a certain level of mental discipline
- Shows that the candidate can take on a major project and see it through

These are both necessary attributes of a technical communicator.

Suitable training might be at a university, TAFE, community college or private provider in NSW, interstate or overseas. The identity of the course provider is of little importance. The key is the suitability for the work that the member does.

Suitable training is defined as training that's appropriate to the work undertaken by the member. It might be in technical writing, journalism, communication or anything else that might reasonably form a good base. It might be engineering, science, law or whatever the candidate writes about.

Standards

Setting standards is very difficult, especially in a profession as broad as ours. We can't set standards for everything, but we must have a minimum standard that is acceptable to the majority and that any practicing technical communication professional can reach. We do not want to alienate anyone.

No matter what entry level we choose, we know that it will be wrong, but we can adjust it. If we wait for a perfect system to be devised before moving, we will never make that move. This proposal gives us a point from which to get moving.

Skills

The assessment of skills has been a major issue with every attempt to create an accreditation system. Most organisations start out with a list of required skills that can be examined, but that approach is very rarely successful because of the complexity and expense. Our group has been down this path, and we will continue our work on tabulating skill sets with a view to creating some order from the present chaos.

ASTC (NSW) is not, and probably never will be in a position to examine candidates to see if their skills are sufficient for a practising technical communicator. Someone else must do it for us.

We argue that if a candidate can hold down a job for three years, the employer is a *de facto* skills examiner. Continued employment is recognition that the candidate has the skills required to perform the required work. If the candidate was inept, the employer would stop paying.

By doing the work, the candidate is being assessed every day. There is no need for a certificate from the employer; the fact that the candidate still has paid employment is every bit as convincing as a certificate.

We acknowledge that using the employer to assess the skills for us is taking a leap of faith. Some workplaces are more demanding than others and some might demand a very low level of skills. However, we believe that those cases will be few and that the risk is acceptable.

We also acknowledge that contractors might have to glue several contracts together to get the three years. We see no problem with that.

Experience

Experience is a vital component of a communicator's training. There's no better trainer than a good mentor, although occasional failure is a good trainer, too.

We'd like to see associates working in documentation teams where they can have the benefit of a good mentor. However, this is one of the things we can't control.

Who will do the Assessment?

We propose auto-assessment wherever possible, to reduce the administration work for the Committee. Student, Associate and Member grades could apply on a form on the ASTC (NSW) web site.

The Society of Editors' scheme for requiring the candidate to submit some sort of statement of experience and skills might have merit, but someone – some group of unpaid volunteers – must be responsible for checking each one against a list of requirements. Our proposal requires basic information to be entered on a web form that is then automatically checked against requirements.

We propose that applications for the grade of Fellow should be individually assessed by the Committee.

Implemented this way, our accreditation system can apply to every member who is interested in using it, without imposing an administrative burden and without interfering with the membership of people who prefer to not participate.

If we invite ASTC bodies in other states to participate, ASTC accreditation can be portable.

You've put a lot of effort into learning your craft and you've gained the recognition of your peers. It's time to tell the world that you're a trained and experienced professional.