

# Teaching standards in technical communication programs

A position paper proposed for CPTSC 2008  
Bradley Dilger, Western Illinois University

Electronic communication and a more global economy have increased the demand for autonomous forms of collaboration. For many kinds of organizations, it's neither feasible nor desirable to seek centralized control of communication, production, and even collaboration itself. The use of standards provides a way to retain a level of control and influence while allowing decentralization. Because of the rising importance of standards in academic and professional discourse and work, I argue that technical communication programs need to include standards as a core form, teaching students how to read, write, integrate, and apply various kinds of standards as part of everyday activities.

The relevance of standards is clearly demonstrated by recent work in the field:

- The World Wide Web Consortium's technical standards for markup, as evangelized by the Web Standards Project (WaSP) and others, have profoundly shaped both browser technology and common methodologies for creating and maintaining web pages. At CPTSC 2007, Karl Stolley argued that these standards should provide the foundation for a comprehensive and sustainable web curriculum in technical communication.
- Universities are among the many organizations who have published visual identity guidelines, design standards which allow stakeholders to create communications which share the consistent "look and feel" of professionally produced materials. Among others, Annette van den Bosch has shown the broad influence of these standards, both internally and among the general public.
- Educational policies are quite often shaped by standards published by professional organizations (such as the Council of Writing Program Administrators' outcomes statement for first-year composition) or state and federal governments. While the particulars of "standards-based accountability" remain fluid, and individual standards vary even more radically, there is little doubt standards-based approaches will be the principal method in both elementary and higher education.

"No Child Left Behind" has been widely criticized for an inflexible "one size fits all" approach to education. I believe part of the problem is a lack of familiarity with standards. All involved—the government employees and educational professionals who wrote the standards, as well as the principals, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders who have to comply with them—need a better grasp of the way standards can and should function. Technical communication educators should focus education about standards on three areas:

- **Development:** standards are often developed by processes which include calls for feedback, suggested revision, and other public involvement. Technical communicators need to understand common processes for developing standards, so they can participate and effectively influence their development.

- **Application:** technical communicators should be able to read and apply a wide variety of standards. Certainly, increased knowledge of standards would empower students to help others do the same, by serving as “expert readers” who could help interpret standards.
- **Integration:** communicators need to understand when a particular project would benefit from the use of standards. Some technical communication textbooks address this area when dealing with requests for proposals and other documents, but not enough attention is given to determining *when* standards are beneficial, *how* communicators can develop them effectively, and *why* they should be integrated into certain kinds of projects.

In summary, my presentation briefly defines standards and shows their importance for technical communication (relying on a handout rather than a long explanation), then discusses ways technical communication programs can ensure students are better equipped to deal with them.