

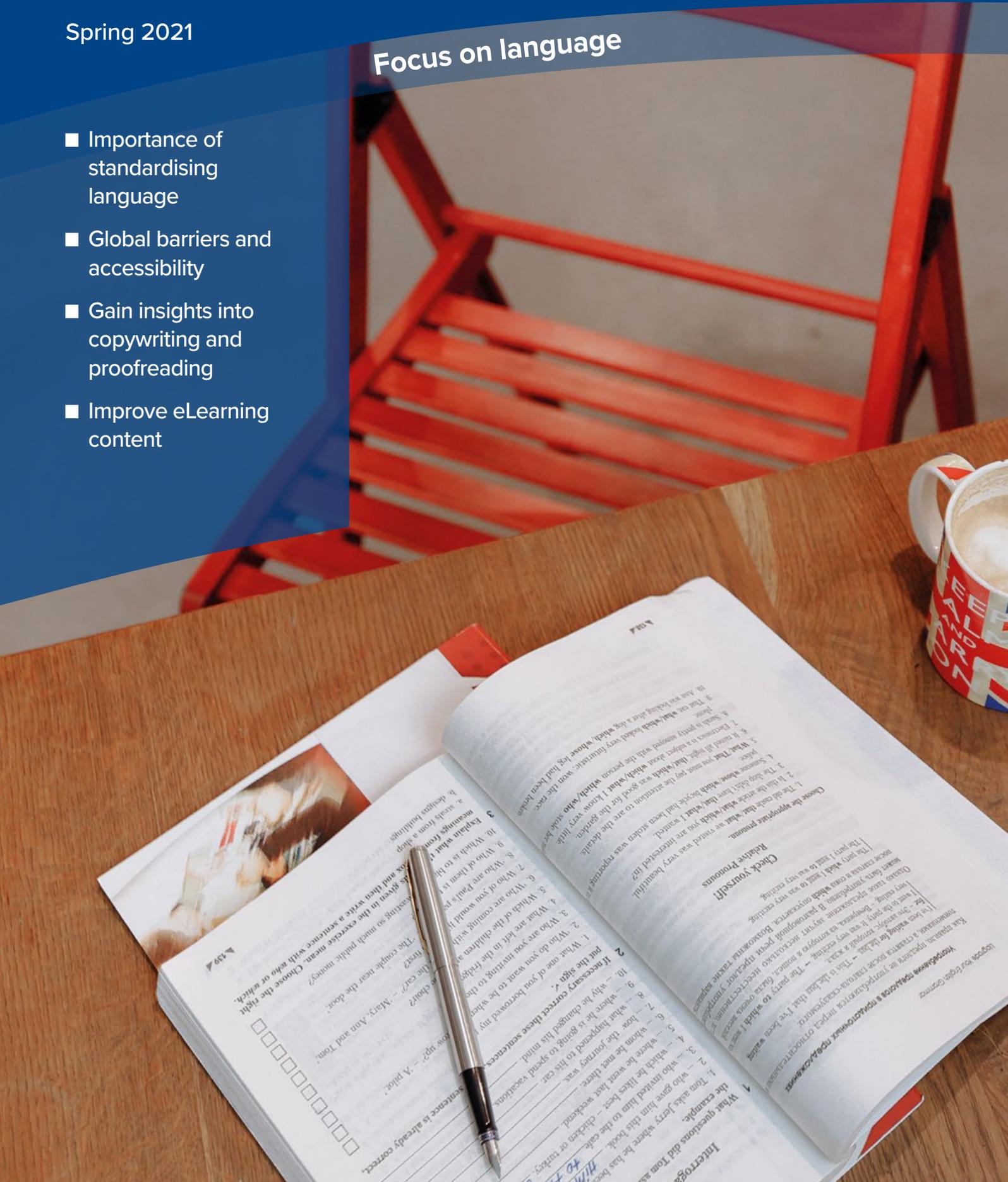
Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

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Focus on language

- Importance of standardising language
- Global barriers and accessibility
- Gain insights into copywriting and proofreading
- Improve eLearning content



Writing for eLearning

13 ways to improve your eLearning content as Helen Hill explains.



When we talk about language with regard to online learning, there is more to consider than whichever of the world's languages has been used. There is a host of other implications around tone of voice, use of jargon, hierarchy, flow, storytelling, personality and more. There are also some differences in how you may need to write and prepare course content when compared to writing for a blog post, slide-based presentation or other type of content.

Creating an online course is not simply a case of moving some PowerPoint slides or existing resources online. They need to be turned into *instructional* materials, and language plays a big part in this.

Here are some of the key implications for language in online learning and suggestions to help us avoid potential issues.

Use plain language

Use of plain language is very important and something I advocate.

This is not a case of 'dumbing down', as is the frequent accusation when plain language is mentioned; it is about writing the way people speak. Plus, it creates learning experiences that are easy to digest, to the point, and inclusive for everyone taking part.

Research has shown that even those who are typically in professions that use lots of jargon, technical language and industry-specific language (for example, lawyers or scientists), prefer to read plain language in their downtime or wherever possible.

"Even highly educated online readers crave succinct information that is easy to scan."
(Nielsen Norman Group, 2017)

Jargon and buzzwords lead to an increased risk of the reader misunderstanding or skimming over the content, and increase the time it takes them to process the information.

Some of the key points that we can learn from plain language research and tips are:

- Make it conversational
- Talk directly to the learners (you, we, us)
- Use the active voice (the learner is a participant, and the learning is active, not passive)
- Use short sentences and paragraphs — try to stick to one idea per paragraph.

If you do need to use specialist terms, ensure that you include a glossary and/or explain the terms in the content. Giving examples can also help understanding.

Here are some great resources if you'd like more information:

- How to write in plain English
- Top 10 Principles for Plain Language
- Plain Language Is for Everyone, Even Experts
- Content Design London and the Readability Guidelines they have produced
- The Oxford Guide to Plain English by Martin Cutts.

Break the text up

All too often I see eLearning content presented as a wall of text — much like the dreaded text-heavy slide presentations they are likely to have been created from.

Creating online learning is not a case of replicating a book on screen, if learners want that, there are many books out there for them to buy. They want a course for the experience of learning on a course and the added value that should bring. They want the information presented to them in a way they can absorb, so making it easy for them to engage and flow through the lesson.

Here are some simple ways to do this.

- Use bullet point lists
 - Use diagrams where you can
 - Use (correctly formatted, descriptive) titles and subtitles to help learners scan the information
 - Use imagery (but make sure it is relevant and helps illustrate or enhance the message — avoid purely decorative imagery)
 - Break text down into shorter paragraphs and sentences.
- Short, simple sentences help learners to scan the information quickly for the information they need; they help those with cognitive or visual impairments, and those who are stressed to digest the learning. The Readability Guidelines and the Oxford Guide to Plain English both state that an average sentence length of 15 words should be used, with a maximum of 25.

Adding the instructional elements

The practice of writing (and building) online learning is called Instructional design. Despite being asked many a time if this means I design IKEA instructions or even dot-to-dot activity books (no, but I want to now!), this means you are creating instructional materials — that is, materials that instruct a learner in a topic.

So, as well as writing about the topic, you need to consider its delivery.

Materials that have been used face-to-face are a great starting point, but even if you have those, they will only get you so far. To add the instructional elements you are looking at how to:

- Guide the learner through the module, unit(s), or course by providing instructions for navigation, activities, etc — the where to click and what to do.
- Add context and backstory — think of that extra information you usually give when delivering the training in person to expand upon your slide. What elements are missing from your 'story' to someone seeing these materials for the first time?
- Pre-empt where questions might arise — you may know the places where the learners are likely to need clarification or would usually ask questions, so you need to think how to account for this.
- Take into account learning methodology, that is, learning theory and how it applies to your approach to creating and structuring the content.
- Make it clear, concise and consistent, through all course materials — online and offline.

Keep it concise

This is possibly the thing that people find the hardest part of putting content together, even if they don't realise it.

We get so wedded to our content and often want to share so much that we end up overdoing it. I promise you, it is much easier to cut other people's content down than your own. Therefore this is a good place in the process to enlist the help of others. Find someone who fits into your ideal client bracket and get them to go through it. They will find it much easier to pinpoint where you have over or underdeveloped a topic, or if anything feels disjointed.

As a starting point though, the trick learning designers have to have in their arsenal is to ask the question — what does the learner NEED to know versus what is NICE to know?

By asking this question and looking back at the course aims and objectives, it is much easier to start identifying where the fluffy bits are that can be removed. However, all that hard work doesn't necessarily need to go to waste.

You can potentially cut out the nice to know and take pleasure in trashing it, or you could provide it as bonus material (think how much extra value you could be giving to those who want it), extension activities, or as links in a resources section. Or you may want to keep it in a folder somewhere in case it is needed for a different course or promotional piece in the future.

Avoid repetition

Unless being used to intentionally reinforce or expand upon a point, avoid repetition. This will also help you to keep it concise. See above.

Repetition is one of the most frequent factors I come across in content which is adding to the length. The same thing written in two or three different ways. This can lead to confusion, make the learning longer than it needs to be and distract from the message the learner should be focusing on.

It can be difficult to spot this in our own content, so again it is something that it is helpful to get someone else to look for.

Apply it to real-life

Being able to apply the learning to their life or role is very important for adult learners. It provides the content and link back to why they are learning, and so can help to provide motivation.

The best way of doing this is to include:

- Case studies
- Scenarios
- Step-by-step guidance for a process
- Pair or group activities.

The inclusion of interactive scenarios can give the learners a safe place to practise their skills and knowledge, without risk to others.

When making this link it is important to consider the language that the learners would use, how they would talk about the topic, their level of confidence with the material and how you tell a story in a relatable manner. If you can pull all these factors together in your writing you will show real empathy and understanding of your learners and help them to fully engage.

Which takes us smoothly onto...

Show empathy

Showing empathy can be a really important strength in your course and there are so many ways empathy can be shown when creating a learning experience. For example:

- Showing your understanding of the challenges learners may be facing and designing the course to help overcome these barriers
- Demonstrating a caring, empathetic nature in dealing with difficult or sensitive topics
- Including accessibility and usability features in the build to help those with support needs and creating an equal experience for all
- Providing support functions to help with technical issues
- Pro-actively using learner feedback to develop your course
- Being helpful.

Each of these things alone makes for a powerful addition, so imagine if you did them all!

And the great news is that this doesn't take much additional effort to all the things we are already doing — get your tone of voice right, choose the right media for presenting information, write (or speak) as your learners would speak, meet the minimum standards of accessibility (at least), and understand your audience. If these things are planned for at the start of a project, it will make the process much smoother and result in a much more empathetic outcome.

Use of empathy can be one of many approaches to take that relate to adjusting your tone of voice.

Tone of voice

By establishing the correct tone of voice, you build trust, connection, and increase the memorability of the content.

The appropriate tone of voice will differ depending on the business of whom the training is intended for, who the end learners are, and the topic that is being studied. For example, a tone of voice which portrays caring, empathy and understanding would be suited to a course based on a medical or health and social care topic, whereas a technology module looking at training staff in the use of dangerous machinery would need to be more authoritative, conservative and frank — there is no room for misunderstanding and consequences must be understood.

There is lots of information about tone of voice out there, but a good place to start is reading the article '*How to define your Tone of Voice*' by SemRush (www.semrush.com/blog/how-to-define-your-tone-of-voice). If you can develop a voice chart for your project, and keep it in sight as a reference, it will help you to achieve a consistent voice.

Keep your personality

If you are creating a course for yourself and your topic and tone of voice allows it, do not be afraid to be yourself, to speak as you would speak, and to revel in your personality. People who are interested in your course have been drawn to you for a reason, and will want to see you reflected in it. So put your unique stamp on it.

Combined with some of the factors above you can make it feel like you are speaking directly to the learner which can help with engagement, relatability and interpreting information.

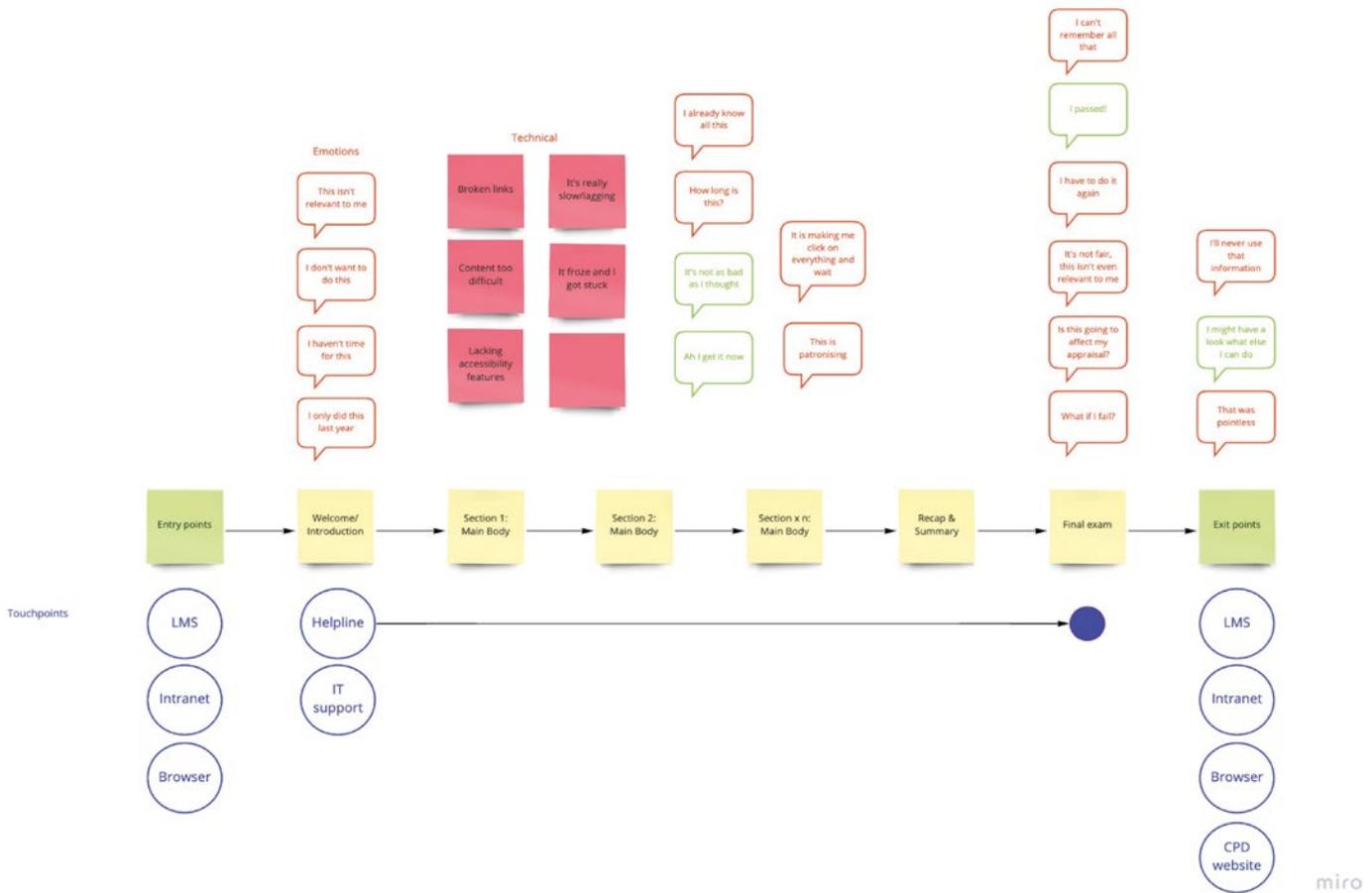


Figure 1. Very basic example looking at a learner's journey in one eLearning module

Flow

Flow relates to how a learner goes from A to B. A learner should not have to work (or even think) how to get through your course. The writing and structure should help them to do that and to focus on what matters - the content and making sure they understand it.

- Consider:
- How you move from one page to the next, one section to the next, one module to the next.
 - How can the learner jump about or revisit information?
 - Does the story flow or does it jump about?
 - Does any information seem out of place or in too much depth compared to the rest?
 - Does anything feel like it doesn't belong?
 - Is it consistent in language and presentation?
 - How do they come into your course, for example, through a Learning Management System (LMS)?
 - What is the order of the content?
 - What happens if they experience a problem?
 - How can you make the journey smoother?

To check the flow, you need to step back and remove yourself from the finer details to look at the overall picture. And put yourself in the learner's shoes — think about whether they will understand what they are to do at each point.

In another technique stolen from my time in a UX (user experience) environment — maybe try plotting a user journey to check how all the elements link (preferably do this in the planning

stages, before you start with the finer detail). Journey maps are a great way to get into the mind of a learner and help you think about the emotions they may be feeling at every stage of the journey to reaching their goal. Figure 1 is a very basic example just looking at a learner's journey in one eLearning module.

Nielsen Norman have a great introduction to this process here: www.nngroup.com/articles/journey-mapping-101

Translation

If the course is going to be translated into other languages, there are implications for the design and production.

The average word length in languages such as German is much greater than for English, some languages read right to left, and not all languages are based on the Roman alphabet.

Therefore, when designing the layout, you need to ensure these are accounted for — you may need to leave extra space in the design to allow for increased characters, and switch the buttons and menu around for those that read right to left. You will also need to factor increased time into your schedule to account for any complications and adaptations that need to be met, and you may need a range of proof-readers and translators to convert and check everything.

You also need to be wary of mistranslation; to avoid this make the context of the topic clear where there are multiple meanings for words. For example, in one project there was a lot of misinterpretation about words like 'menu'. We meant it as a navigation feature in the eLearning, but it was translated as a

restaurant menu. But when the word was just listed alone in a document, it could have meant either one to the translator.

Localisation

As well as translation you need to consider if localisation is likely to be an issue. There are two common ways in which I have had to consider this in my eLearning projects:

- Make sure that you are not using metaphors or language that will only be understood by a specific audience or could easily be misinterpreted.
- Where there are local dialects, make sure that the correct one is being used and it is consistent, or that any localisation is removed and just the main common language is used.

This can become particularly tricky when there are many local dialects in a language, and the absence of one which takes precedence. If your work is to be translated, make sure you have discussed and understood this with an experienced translator.

Testing and feedback

Finally, a short word on testing.

The only way we can make sure that we are writing in a way that suits our audience is to ask them. This means either completing some user testing with members of your target audience and/or ensuring you get their feedback — specifically asking questions about their understanding of the language and terminology used.

User testing is not something I see used much in eLearning, but having had experience of this in a UX role, I can see the huge benefits it would bring to our industry. It helps to dispel assumptions and understand how the minds of our target learners work. I found it fascinating to watch test subjects — they often pick up on things we miss, and interpret information or instructions in a totally different way to that which was intended. For the sake of a few hours invested to go through the content with a sample of your end users, it can bring an incredible amount of value and help you pick up on any common issues. ■

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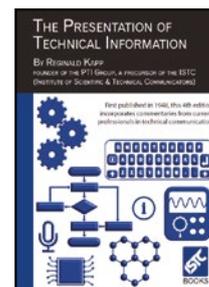
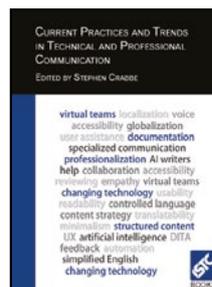
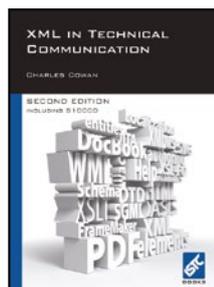
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