Writing for a North American Audience

BY AMRUTA RANADE | *Guest Columnist*

A SIGNIFICANT CHUNK of the technical documentation produced for a North American audience is created outside the United States. I know this from personal experience—I am an Indian technical writer who worked for American companies throughout my career. Overexposure to American sitcoms, movies, and other media has lead us—non-American technical writers—into believing that we "know" American culture. Thus the documents that we create are based on the stereotypes and faulty assumptions about American culture. As a result, our technical documents are plagued with issues caused by a lack of cultural awareness.

Personal Realizations

I first realized this interesting situation when I came to the United States to pursue my Masters of Science degree in technical communication at Missouri University of Science and Technology. Prior to coming to the United States, I had worked as a technical writer for five years in India. I was fairly confident in my skills and believed I had a good understanding of my audience's culture. This was the case until one of my American professors made the following comment on an assignment: "This does not sound right to my American ears."

I was taken aback. I had written for an American audience for my entire career! Had I taken my audience for granted and written based on faulty cultural assumptions?

The question begged me to find out what I didn't know about writing for a North American audience, and it was the perfect opportunity to delve into how to write more effectively for an American audience. I was surrounded by American classmates and professors who could serve as my target audience and help me remedy the situation.

Another fortunate happenstance was that a course titled International Technical Communication was one of the mandatory courses in the first semester of my degree. This course provided me with the lens (Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory) to look at American and Indian cultures and understand the intercultural dynamics.

Intercultural Analysis

I used the online tool on Hofstede's website to compare Indian and American cultures on the basis of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (*www.geert-hofstede.com*). The result of the comparison is shown in Table 1.

Dimension	United States	India
Power Distance	40	77
Individualism vs. Collectivism	91	48
Masculinity vs. Femininity	62	56
Uncertainty Avoidance	46	40
Long-term vs. Short-term orientation	26	51
Indulgence vs. Restraint	68	26

Table 1. Comparison of Indian and American cultures based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Upon completing this exercise, I realized that, to write for a North American audience, I needed to treat American culture as I would treat any other foreign culture. To develop content for a foreign culture, we need to focus on the cultural values that received opposite scores in the analysis and then try to address them in the content. From the comparison, it is evident that to develop content for an American audience, we need to focus on the cultural dimensions of power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint.

Understanding the cultural differences helped me make sense of the "rules" that are omnipresent in the Indian technical writing industry. Technical writing teams publish rules and guidelines for Indian technical writers to follow while writing for

an American audience. But skimming through huge lists of rules does not help the writers because they do not understand the logic and rationale for the rules.

One of the popular rules is: avoid vague language. This rule seems straightforward and easy to implement. But in practice, what Indians consider unambiguous, clear language is what Americans may consider vague. Analyzing the rule based on the cultural dimensions, I realized that it stems from the fact that American society has a low uncertainty avoidance index as compared to Indian society.

Americans prefer factual, reality-based content. They do not prefer imaginary scenarios but prefer real-life case studies. Indians are more willing to put their creative skills to use even while reading a technical document. As an Indian writer, my default way of starting a technical article is: "Imagine a scenario where.…" I can include imaginary scenarios while writing for an Indian audience, but I need to include real, factual case studies while writing for an American audience.

Another popular rule is: address the user. India is a high-context society, whereas American society is low-context. Addressing the user directly in India could be considered rude, whereas if you address the user in third person in the United States, they might find it awkward. Thus even straightforward rules need deeper interpretation from the cultural lens to understand them well.

Language
English is one of India's official languages. Most Indian working professionals are well versed with English. This is definitely true for Indian technical writers. We pride ourselves on being grammatically correct and fluent in English. That's the reason I was taken aback when I got the negative comment on my assignment. I realized that my flavor of English is International English, or British English influenced by Indianisms. Americans obviously prefer American English. The industry practice to remedy this problem is to publish an exhaustive list of words that are different in British English and American English. But I never found the lists helpful—they are way too long to be of any use in everyday writing lives, and it is a mammoth task to memorize all of them. Also, the words are not the real problem anyway—the main concern is the differences in grammar.

To overcome the issue, I started studying American grammar textbooks. I figured if I were to learn a different language, I would learn its grammar from scratch. Why would learning American English be any different? I am still learning American grammar, but it has already started paying dividends. The comments from the professor have started changing from, "This does not sound right to my American ears" to "This reads well."

Visual Communication
Another course that helped me understand the cultural difference between India and the United States was Advanced Theories of Visual Communication. The course made me aware that not only the written word but even images and visual elements of documents need to be analyzed from the cultural perspective.

For example, while choosing a typeface for a document, we would probably choose Times New Roman for an Indian audience, and Calibri or Helvetica for an American audience. This is again related to the high- and low-context indexes of the two cultures. As a high-context culture, Indian audiences prefer a traditional and formal typeface such as Times New Roman. Americans live in a low context culture, so an informal yet professional typeface, such as Calibri or Helvetica, will work well.

Technical Editing
During the peer-review sessions for each assignment, I was able to get my work reviewed by my American classmates, which helped me avoid Indianisms and British English influences in my writing. I believe that if we have an American technical editor for each Indian technical writing team, it can prove very useful.

Strategies to Consider
From these experiences, I learned the following strategies that American technical communicators can implement when working with non-American colleagues or clients:
- Make your Indian colleagues and clients aware of the cultural differences between Indian technical writers and an American audience.
- When compiling the writing rulebook of "do's" and "don'ts" for an American audience, educate the technical writers not only on the rules, but the logic and rationale for the rules. You can base the logic on Hofstede's cultural dimensions.
- Develop training programs for teaching American English to non-American technical writers.
- Educate technical writers about how visual design choices are influenced by cultural differences.
- Assign an American technical editor for every technical writing team.

Developing and implementing these strategies will help non-American technical writers create effective technical documents for an American audience. ⓘ

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REFERENCE   Hofstede, Geert H. Culture's *Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.