

Inclusive writing and user-centric strategies in technical communication

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Paris University, July 2021

Documentation and technical communication have gone beyond the stage of secondary support, to become a necessary product while creating a product that reflects its target users is now a common strategy. Then, could inclusive writing be relevant in technical communication to meet users' expectations?

By interviewing technical communication professionals on their products and experience, cross-checked with research, we are seeking to answer this question. From technical guides to marketplace interfaces, we were able to identify how inclusivity could be integrated into their products and learn when it added value.

While businesses take every precaution to be seen as inclusive, we could imagine that it would show in the content they create. Inclusive writing is the ultimate lever to women and men's equality in language. Yet, its cultural and political association added with the variety of its form can make any company think twice before incorporating it.

Technical communicators are confronted with a brand-new way of writing content that can sometimes go against the sacred rules of Technical Communication¹. At the same time, it implies great change management, not only for users but for collaborators as well. Even though technology might answer most of the drawbacks and complications, is inclusive writing worth the risk?

Keywords: inclusivity, technical communication, user experience, feedback, product, strategy.

¹ Moxley, J. et al. *Technical writing prose style*. See https://writingcommons.org/section/style/styles-of-writing/technical-writing-style/?doing_wp_cron=1625712910.2560880184173583984375

Acknowledgments

We would first like to appreciate Marie Girard's guidance throughout this whole research project.

Also, we give a huge thank you to all the people we interviewed, this article would not have been possible without your inputs.

A last thank you to Rhiannon who proofread the article.

Introduction

Inclusive writing is part of a very strong current socio-cultural context and the business world is not immune to this growing trend. Despite political efforts to set aside this linguistic practice rooted in a desire for diversity and inclusiveness, the women and men we meet in the street remain the consumers of tomorrow. According to the *Manuel d'écriture inclusive*², published in 2016 by the organization *Mots-clé*, inclusive writing is the sum of graphic and syntactic attentions that make it possible to ensure equal representation of both sexes. The first measures aiming to make language more gender-neutral started in the 1970's, when the US Department of Labor reworked its nomenclature of job names to eliminate markers of a person's gender³: for example, turning "stewardess" into "flight attendant" or "fireman" into "firefighter". In French, the question is even more difficult due to the omnipresence of gender markers in nouns and inflections.

Meanwhile, technical communication is becoming increasingly complex and user-oriented. The interface of an application, the rules of a board game, the user guide for a microwave oven are now shaped by the user's needs and reflect as closely as possible the target identified by the company. According to Jean Hollis Weber⁴, "Technical communication's goal is to convey information to an audience, in a form that the audience can understand and use." She specifies that "we should avoid, if possible, anything that interferes with clear communication." Inclusive writing is often depicted as confusing, hard to read and visually unsightly and "if [a] part of our audience is insulted (or offended, irritated, confused, or misled) or stumbles over the way we express ourselves, that reaction will interfere with the reception and understanding of our message." Thus, the potentially disagreeable aspects of inclusive writing could have a negative impact on the quality of the documentation.

Therefore, one might wonder whether inclusive writing would be a positive factor in attracting an already identified target group or, on the contrary, whether it would scare off users who are mainly opposed to this movement. The idea that the integration of this practice is a neutral effect on the target users is equally likely. According to Shoeb Ahmed⁵ "with the evolution of technology and our global society, customers are now closer to businesses than

² Haddad, R. (2016). *Manuel d'écriture inclusive*. See https://www.univ-tlse3.fr/medias/fichier/manuel-decriture_1482308453426-pdf

³ Arbour, M. et al. (2014). *Féminisation linguistique : étude comparative de l'implantation de variantes féminines marquées au Canada et en Europe*. Publisher: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme. See <https://www.cairn-info.ezproxy.u-paris.fr/revue-langage-et-societe-2014-2-page-31.htm>

⁴ Hollis Weber, J. (2012). *Gender-neutral Technical Writing*. See <https://techwhirl.com/gender-neutral-technical-writing/>

⁵ Shoeb, H. (2020). *Customer Centric Brands: Defining the Future of Business*. See <https://www.smartkarrot.com/resources/blog/customer-centric-brands/>

ever before. Slowly, companies learned how to harness the power of customer insights. Today, that insight is an integral part of many businesses' growth strategies.”

In this case, is it cost-effective to integrate inclusive writing into products? And if so, in what ways? UX writing, technical writing, copywriting: could inclusive writing be relevant in technical communication to meet users' expectations?

1. Method

1.1 Documentary research

In order to answer these questions, we started by reading existing literature on the subjects of inclusive writing in general and inclusive writing applied to technical communication, as well as on the topic of user-centric strategies.

1.2 Interviews

Using what we learned, we compiled questions to interview professionals of technical communication and UX design, working in different fields. We paid attention to making these questions as neutral and open as possible, to allow each interviewee to freely give their opinion and feedback. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes each for a total of 10 open-ended questions.

The sample group of participants are of various ages, genders and have different backgrounds. Out of the eight interviewees, there are four men and four women, aged between 24 and 45 years old, working in fields such as Payments, SEO, Software Engineering. We knew four of them from our workplaces, and got in contact with the other four thanks to connections. Interviews were conducted in French and will later be translated in English when quoted in this article.

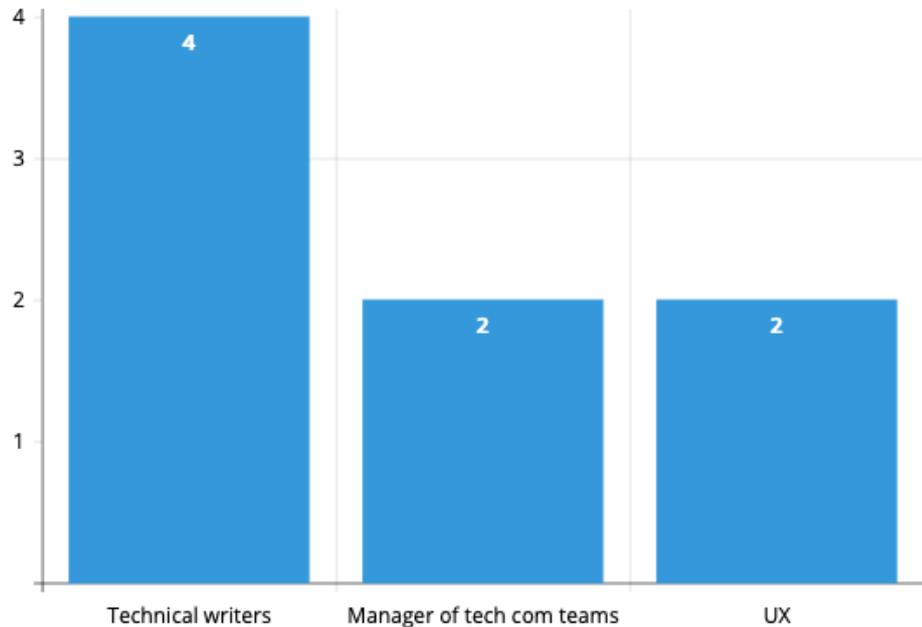


Figure 1: *What is your current job position? Survey on 8 participants, June 2021.*

These questions aimed to learn more about each person's experience with and opinion on inclusive writing both as professionals and individuals. The questions focused on each person's knowledge of inclusive writing, such as why should one use it and how to apply it, whether or not this practice was included in their company's strategy, for example in a style guide, and their experience applying it.

We then discussed the results of the interviews and drew links between them, noticing patterns and differences in experiences and opinions, allowing us to find answers to our original question and draw a picture of the current position of inclusive writing within technical communication.

2. Results

We decided to present the results of the interviews by categorizing the different topics that arose. We decided to select germane answers as some did not yield elements relevant for our article.

2.1 What is inclusive writing?

Our first question was about our participants' understanding of what inclusive writing entails as well as its goals. Here are some quotes:

“I don’t know anyone that writes this way”

“I immediately think of gender equality and women inclusion”

“A political game and making language more complex”

These quotes give an insight of what inclusive writing means for people who are more or less involved with it. Conversely, academic research gives us a more precise definition of it: for Christophe Benzitoun⁶, “Inclusive writing represents a set of techniques that aim to bring out equality, or symmetry, between women and men in texts and to adopt a language which does not discriminate against women.”

2.2 Where is inclusive writing usually found?

Before going further in the topic, we had to think about whether inclusive writing and technical communication could even be linked at all. Indeed, the first examples that come to mind when thinking of instances of inclusive writing are usually not user guides. Most of the interviewees usually find inclusive writing in the press, political speeches, mobile applications and social media.

2.3 Is inclusive writing a discussion topic in companies?

We then wondered if the topic of inclusive writing is actually discussed in companies and if the people working in technical writing or UX ever wondered whether or not to use it. As we can see on the diagram below, out of the 8 interviewees, 3 did not think about using inclusive writing in their work, 2 thought about it and decided to use it because they thought it was important in their texts to not exclude people. They also decided to write inclusively because they do not know exactly who their target users are so using a gender-neutral language allows them to get around this problem.

⁶ Benzitoun, C. et al. (2020). *Inclusive writing: a first assessment of the controversy*. See <https://world.edu/inclusive-writing-a-first-assessment-of-the-controversy/>

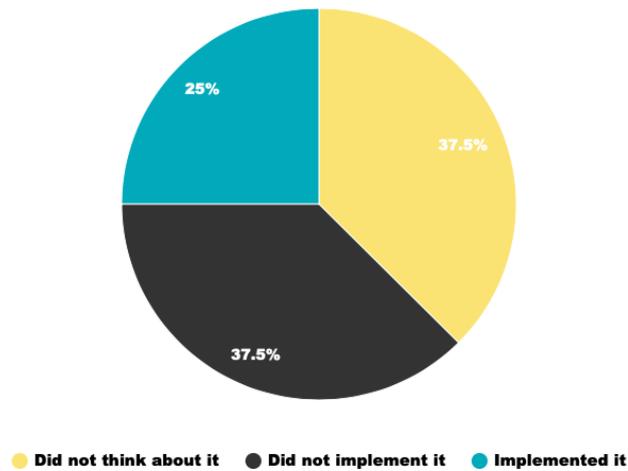


Figure 2: *Have you thought of implementing inclusive writing in your job? Survey on 8 participants, June 2021.*

The last 3 interviewees discussed whether or not to implement inclusive writing but decided not to. The reasons for this choice are that there was no request from customers so they felt like there was no need to implement it and/or that it was time consuming because it would require reworking previous documentations and to apply the rule to all departments like marketing etc.

Participants told us about what could trigger the discussion of whether to implement inclusive writing or not. For example, one of the interviewees got interested in the topic when learning about the subject of our article. This shows that inclusive writing is not necessarily a topic that comes to mind during day-to-day activities of technical communicators. And for some participants, inclusive writing is a debate topic during break times rather than one discussed formally during meetings.

Interviewees also highlighted the problems they thought inclusive writing can cause. First was the question of the languages they write their contents that later affects the way inclusive writing can be implemented: depending on whether the interviewees write documentation in French or English, their strategies differ. This brings us to the most contested aspects in both French and English: the interpoint and other punctuations used for inclusivity. Indeed, an article of the Writing center of the University of North Carolina⁷ points out that “while this solution specifically includes women and men and works well in many situations, some readers find it stylistically awkward, especially when “she/he” is repeated

⁷ American Psychological Association (2010). *Gender inclusive language*. Publisher: Manual of the American Psychological Association. See <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/gender-inclusive-language/>

many times throughout a piece of writing.” This rings even truer in French: the interpoint used to list both the masculine and feminine variants of a word (for “a user”, you would write “un.e utilisateur.rice”) is often viewed as particularly heavy. The use of punctuation can also cause problems when relying on software to find keywords or to separate sentences. We will discuss each of these problems in more detail during the Discussion part of this article, as well as potential solutions and responses.

2.4 Do you take customers’ feedback into consideration?

We then approached the subject of user-centric strategies and whether or not they were implemented. Out of the 8 interviewees, only 2 regularly received feedback on their documentation to take into account. The rest tended to feel more “isolated” during the writing and publishing process. We thought this result interesting as it could be contradictory to what the companies’ strategies evolve to. Indeed, the final users’ needs have to be taken into account in the process of developing products so that they meet their expectations and needs better. In this sense, Shoeb Ahmed⁸ tells us that “customer expectations are growing and dissatisfied customers can easily impact a brand’s reputation” so a “customer-centric approach is the future of business. With so many options available for customers, it’s difficult to remain competitive without focusing on the customer.”

3. Discussion

We will now lay down in more detail the issues posed by inclusive writing, and offer potential solutions and counter-arguments.

3.1 Aesthetics, complexity and habit

The most common issue found with inclusive writing is the way it looks when typed or written down. As we mentioned earlier, there are several ways to write sentences that include both feminine and masculine forms.

3.1.1 Repetition

FR: “*Les serveurs et les serveuses commencent à 18 heures.*”

EN: “*Waiters and waitresses start at 6 p.m.*”

⁸ Shoeb, H. (2020). *Customer Centric Brands: Defining the Future of Business*. See <https://www.smartkarrot.com/resources/blog/customer-centric-brands/>

This method requires no transformation of the language, so it poses no problem of needing to get used to it or being rebuked by how it looks. However, it implies making longer sentences and could make documentation very heavy if used constantly, which is against the very principles of technical communication. It is more suited when addressing an audience during a speech or at the start of an email for example.

3.1.2 Gender neutral words

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a gender-neutral term is one that refers to people and not especially to men or women.

FR: *“Le personnel de service est très attentif et patient.”*

EN: *“Service staff is very attentive and patient.”*

This method can use existing words, but they are not always applicable, especially in French. Thus, neologisms that “neutralize” words are being invented: “man days” become “person days”, “mankind” is replaced with “humanity”, etc. This vocabulary is more and more used in companies.

In English, it is common to use “they” as a singular, gender-neutral pronoun, a century-old practice that can be found in novels by Jane Austen or Charles Dickens⁹, and is commonly used in documentation and technical communication. In an effort to promote gender-neutrality in French, advocates started following this example by using neologisms such as the pronoun “iel”, which contracts “il” and “elle”. Unlike the singular “they”, “iel” is rarely used in documentation in French.

FR: *“Iels parlent anglais et français.”*

EN: *“They speak English and French.”*

These pronouns are already used by Twitter, visible when looking up a person’s profile. However, they both cause problems with understandability of contents, especially to

⁹ Krauthamer, H. S. (2021). *The Great Pronoun Shift: The Big Impact of Little Parts of Speech*. Publisher: Taylor & Francis. See <https://books.google.fr/books?id=N-8eEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT21&lpg=PT21&dq=jane+austen+charles+dickens+pronoun+they&source=bl&ots=jdi-e2ybXP&sig=ACfU3U2rm8dyX43T7XIs6ioeptcBEs-PuA&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwim57iGvcbxAhUN14UKHcItAOcQ6AEwCXoECAwQAw#v=onepage&q=jane%20austen%20charles%20dickens%20pronoun%20they&f=false>

non-native speakers. Non-native English speakers can often be confused by the use of singular they.

3.1.3 Interpoints

The interpoint is a vertically centered dot. Funnily enough, it has been used since Antiquity to separate words. In the context of French inclusive writing, it is used to display both feminine and masculine variants of gendered words.

FR: *“Les développeur·euse·s web sont intéressé·e·s par l’Agilité.”*

EN: *“Web developers are interested in Agility.”*

We should note that the interpoint is mostly used in French. Its use was encouraged for several reasons: because it is not used in any other contexts, it should be clear that the only reason for its use is inclusivity, whereas parenthesis that were commonly used previously (in expressions such as “les participant(e)s) implied an idea of secondarity rather than equality. This method is the most controversial one: it requires modifying words, is often considered “ugly” and the use of interpoints is very recent, especially in French. While they require the addition of fewer characters than the repetition of entire words, they are still more complicated than basic forms.

Moreover, there is a wide variety of ways the interpoint can be placed in words and which parts of the word should be separated, depending on the way masculine and feminine forms differ. Thus, existing forms include “invité·e”, “utilisateur·rice”, “le·a développeur·euse”, and their plural forms. All the variations may distract the user from the content and the message, and make them lose time while they figure out what they are reading. Finally, the interpoint is usually not included on keyboards, which makes it hard to implement on a day-to-day basis. Thus, it’s often replaced by a simple period or hyphen, which can be confusing, can cause technical issues with automatic correction and even bigger problems for works relying on algorithms to look up words and expressions or separate sentences.

3.1.4 Slashes

FR: *“Il/elle clique sur Paramètres.”*

EN: *“He/she clicks on Settings.”* or *“S/he clicks on Settings.”*

Using slashes could seem like a good option as it includes both genders without changing the words themselves. Unlike the interpoint, the slash does not modify or cut words, but it still requires putting a punctuation mark where there usually would not be one.

However, as already mentioned, this makes the reading difficult, even though the slash is in between two words, it is not used like it usually would and can interrupt the reading flow and disrupt the reader from the content. This can pose difficulties in technical communication as it is supposed to be concise, easy to read and understand. Using the slash method adds punctuation marks but also implies to have, in each occurrence, both the masculine and feminine versions. This makes the texts longer and heavier.

3.2 Accessibility

A common question posed by inclusive writing, especially when it is implemented through the use of interpuncts, is that it could be difficult to understand for blind people who use text-to-speech technology or people with dyslexia who have trouble reading. In a communication published in 2017, the *Fédération des Aveugles de France*¹⁰ wrote: “Wanting to refer to both genders in the same sentence at any cost creates a language that is unintelligible and incomprehensible, especially to those experiencing difficulties with said language, such as people with dyslexia. For blind people, [...] it is utterly indecipherable with our screen readers”.

Julie Moynat¹¹ tested how 3 text-to-speech software programs read the expression “participant·e·s” and found that 2 of them vocalized the words “point” or “point médian”, and the third one pronounced “participant”, then “e”, then “s”. Inclusive writing relying on the interpunct can make the reading less natural, confusing, and possibly difficult to understand. Inversely, using gender-neutral words or repetition would not cause particular issues with text-to-speech softwares. Moynat points out that software can evolve; and indeed, the *Réseau d'Etude Handi-Féministe* collective wrote in a publication¹² opposing the *Fédération des Aveugles de France* communication quoted above: “The issue is not inclusive writing itself but, on one hand, the programmation of text-to-speech software [...] and on the other, the lack of education on the subject. Reading an interpunct with a screen reader is currently uncomfortable, sometimes incomprehensible. But if programmers worked to change this, the problem could be fixed. We prefer to condemn the sexism presiding over the programming of software, rather than condemning antisexism that encourages using inclusive writing.”

¹⁰ Fédération des aveugles de France (2017). *Les Aveugles de France disent « non au mélange des genres »*. See https://aveuglesdefrance.org/app/uploads/2021/03/CP_Non-au-melange-des-genres_Ecriture-inclusive_Aveugles-de-France.pdf

¹¹ Moynat, J. (2019). *Écriture inclusive au point médian et accessibilité : avançons vers des solutions*. See <https://www.lalutineduweb.fr/ecriture-inclusive-accessibilite-solutions/>

¹² Lyonefigies (2020). *Contre la récupération du handicap par les personnes anti écriture inclusive*. See <https://efigies-ateliers.hypotheses.org/5274>

It thus seems possible to reconcile gender-inclusive writing with the inclusivity of blind people: first, by avoiding the interpoint and choosing other methods such as gender-neutral terms, and secondly by working to adapt text-to-speech and other accessibility software programs to the evolution of language.

3.3 Awareness

Overall, it seems the question of implementing inclusive writing and its possible negative impacts on understandability also raises the question of awareness and promoting equality through language.

A common response when we asked whether inclusive writing could be implemented in a style guide tended to be “If we did, we would have to go back and change hundreds or thousands of pages of documentation to fit this new guideline”, costing much time and resources. But applying this logic would imply never modifying style guides, and is ultimately counterproductive: style guides serve to help make better content, so as technical communicators, we should feel free to make modifications that would improve content quality. Conversely, we could argue that not specifying at all the way gendered words should be handled could be interpreted as leeway by the writer and cause at best discrepancies throughout documents, at worst errors in the handling of inclusive writing. Many advocates for inclusive writing work on projects to make it more accessible and help writers handle it in an understandable and consistent way (such as “The Responsible Communication Style Guide¹³” by Recompiler Media, or the website “En inclusif¹⁴”, a search engine for inclusive writing) hoping that the more people understand and correctly use it, the more it will spread.

Another perceived issue with starting to use inclusive writing is the risk of seeming “political”. Inclusive writing causes many debates, especially in French - the *Académie Française* made a declaration¹⁵ in 2017 that it was an “*aberration*” that put the French language in “mortal peril” - and the question of whether a writing method is right or wrong, inclusive or exclusive, might not have its place in technical documents aiming to convey explanations in the most neutral and understandable way possible. Indeed, it is mostly seen in domains such as politics and the press, especially more progressive outlets, rather than guides or manuals that are based on objective facts. As a result, the issue has fallen into the public eye as an engaged, sometimes manipulative practice far from the everyday use of language. Thus, there is a double impact: not only might a company implementing inclusive

¹³ Recompiler Media (2017). *The responsible communication guide*. See <https://rcstyleguide.com/>

¹⁴ En inclusif. *Comment écrit-on en inclusif déjà ?* See <https://rcstyleguide.com/>

¹⁵ Académie française (2017). *Déclaration de l'Académie française sur l'écriture dite "inclusive"*. See <https://www.academie-francaise.fr/actualites/declaration-de-lacademie-francaise-sur-lecriture-dite-inclusive>

writing confuse readers not used to it, but it might also set apart the company as “politically involved”. But, as expressed above, the more widespread inclusive writing is, the more used to it society becomes. And inversely, resisting a practice aiming to promote gender equality could also be seen as a political choice.

3.4 Technology

With the evolution of technology and our global society, customers are now closer to businesses than ever before. Slowly, companies have learned how to harness the power of customer insights. Today, those insights are an integral part of businesses’ growth strategy. Technology has also made it possible for companies to obtain, stock and analyze users’ data and behavior. It has become much easier to identify a user’s gender and journey on products, sometimes without even having to ask them explicitly. Technical communication has not been spared by this phenomenon and had to reinvent itself from printed manuals to online documentation. It made it much more flexible for the writer to adapt their documentation to the users’ needs. To offer the best user experience possible, technical communicators have innovated to today’s most user-centric guide: the guided-tour. From literature and our interviews, we understand that guided-tours allow writers to personalize content according to user metadata. For example, one of our interviewee’s company has developed a solution to obtain the user’s job title from their profile in order to offer a tailored tutorial. We can wonder if the same could be done with gender. We already know that gender is one of the basic information contained in the user profile and therefore adapt pronouns to that information. The interviewee warned us on the issues it might represent to teams that share one account. The content would be fitting one user and the others would have difficulties identifying themselves consequently.

The benefits of this recent technological development also applies to content directly regardless of the medium. Alex¹⁶, an open-source software that helps you catch inconsiderate writing, can highlight the insensitive text you might use while writing and suggest alternatives. Not only is such a revolutionary tool available for free from Github and so accessible for every writer, but it alone represents the interest and the future of inclusive writing.

¹⁶ Alex. *Catch insensitive, inconsiderate writing*. See <https://alexjs.com/>

Conclusion

In conclusio, we can say that inclusive writing may help reduce gender-based discrimination but the ways of writing inclusively (interpoint, slash, etc) can be difficult to implement and to read, both in French and in English. This could just be a matter of habit as we are not used to seeing inclusive writing that much but in technical communication, as for UX, it can be a real problem. Habit or not, for now, inclusive writing seems to be too distracting for the readers which goes against the principles of technical communication. If the documentation is too long and difficult to understand, it is counterproductive as the documentation meant to help is not serving its purpose.

Moreover, implementing user-centric strategies in already established companies can be difficult, time consuming and can cost more money than it can earn as all the departments have to implement it in all their texts.

Finally, our research leads us to believe that there is no real demand for inclusive writing from the users. So, for now, it does not seem relevant in technical communication as far as users' expectations go but it could be at some point in the future, that is if companies take users' feedback into account.

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