# Southern Communicator Article

## March 2016

Note:

The following article was published in 2016 in Southern Communicator, the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Technical Communication. The author of this article, Elizabeth Abbott, was Chair for one of the annual conferences of the Australian Society for Technical Communication and is the Managing Director of TechWriter.

Information Mapping Australia is no longer the official distributor of the Information Mapping products and courses in Australia and New Zealand. However, the methodology still remains relevant today and underpins TechWriter's current expanded offering of courses and services.

# Is Information Mapping® still relevant?

## Elizabeth Abbott explains why adopting Information Mapping is still relevant and a great way to start as a technical writer.

There is a view that Information Mapping is outdated, old fashioned and irrelevant. I would argue that in today's world, its methodology is more needed than ever. This is because Information Mapping is about the creation of **clear and concise written communication** that is easy for readers to use and quick for writers to produce.

It is a great approach for those starting out in technical writing as it provides a systematic approach to creating and writing the full range of business and technical documents.

## What's in it for me?

If you are an experienced technical writer, you can use Information Mapping to:

- improve your productivity – produce more in a shorter timeframe
- improve your communication – get your message across more effectively.

If you are starting as a technical writer, you can use Information Mapping to:

- apply a systematic approach to creating and writing technical documents that work
- obtain an internationally recognized certificate of proficiency and get your first job in technical writing.

## What is Information Mapping?

First I need to explain a bit about the Information Mapping methodology. Let's start with Figure 1.

### Look at the difference

Which of these would you prefer to read?



*Figure 1. Comparison of a document before and after rewriting using Information Mapping principles.*

Research and experience indicate that readers, writers, and organisations face a number of common problems when communicating information, both on paper and online.

### Results of Poor Document design

When readers try to use poorly designed documents, they:

- get lost
- get discouraged
- guess what to do
- ask someone for help, or
- try short-cuts.

Poor design lowers productivity and causes mistakes and frustration with the information. Information Mapping provides the solution to reader and writer problems.

## Why use Information Mapping?

Information Mapping is based on learning theory, human factors engineering and cognitive science. The method is based on research into how people take in and process information and provides guidelines for analysing, organising, and presenting information effectively to promote reader access and comprehension. As such it is timeless and can be applied to all forms of business and technical writing.

### It's based on how people process information

Over 60 studies have shown quantifiable benefits for readers, writers and organisations. On-going research continues to support the benefits of clarity in writing. Information Mapping has stood the test of time and proved its usefulness.

### It's effective

In the years since the method was first developed, many organisations have reported significant benefits. Here are a couple of examples:

**Amex** used it to reduce the time it took for call centre staff to find information, resulting in savings of more than 1 million minutes a year (or 9 staff).

**ResMed** used Information Mapping to improve the productivity of their instructional designers resulting in a 67% reduction in the time it took to develop new modules and a 20% reduction in the length of modules.
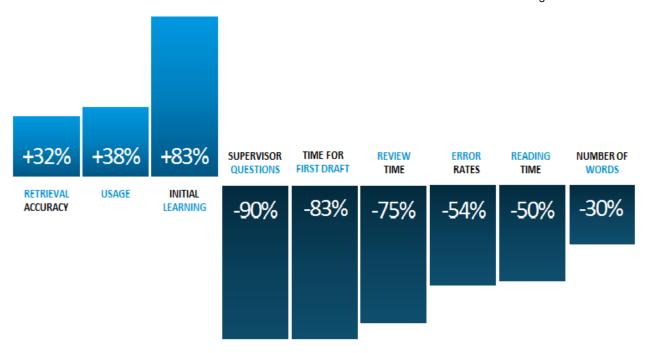


*Figure 2. The verified benefits gained when IM documents were used .*

### It's structured writing

Structured writing was coined by Robert Horn as the generic term for the approach described in Information Mapping. It is at the heart of most current standards and tools such as DITA, XML, AuthorIT,  Like all good structured writing, Information Mapping separates the creation of content from its presentation – perfect for single sourcing, multiple output formats and content management systems.

### It facilitates a standard approach

When an organiseation adopts Information Mapping as its methodology for written communication, the presentation guidelines provide an immediate standardization.

FS Pro 2013 is the Information Mapping add-on for Word that facilitates the task of creating Information Mapping documents and comes with a suite of templates for the most common business documents from a meeting agenda through job aids to project proposals.

## It's in demand

At least four job ads on seek [in Australia] in February 2016 have specifically asked for people with Information Mapping skills. Many very experienced and successful technical communicators (they are now employers) learnt Information Mapping early in their careers. They say that they still use the principles in all their work. They know that it is more productive for them to employ writers who can use the method.

## What do you think?

This article has been written using the Information Mapping principles so put it to the test.

- Did you find it easy to read?
- Were you able to find the information relevant to you and skip sections that you weren't interested in?
- Does it look appealing?

## How do I get started?

The good news is that the Information Mapping methodology has been distilled into a 3-day course that covers everything you need to apply it to your writing immediately. The course includes a 12-month subscription to the FS Pro software and access to sit the multiple-choice proficiency exam.  eLearning and modular video training are also available for those not able to attend classroom courses or who want a refresher.
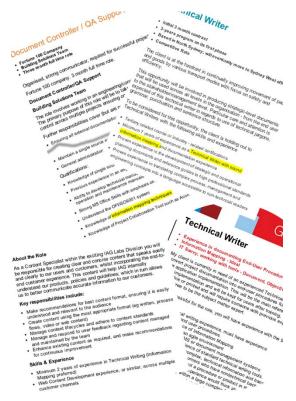


*Figure 3. seek adverts in February 2016*

To learn more, visit www.informationmapping.com.  This international website has free webinars, white papers and trial versions of the software and video training. To find out when a course is being held in your area or to purchase items in AUD or NZD visit our Australian and New Zealand website,  www.infomapping.com.au.



Elizabeth Abbott is the Managing Director of TW Training (TechWriter) and Information Mapping Pty Ltd. Information Mapping is a joint venture between TechWriter and HCi to specifically promote Information Mapping courses and services.  TW Training is dedicated to providing learning programs to help business people improve their written communication skills.  To do this she is working with recognised professionals in the field such as HCi, Jill Nicholson and Information Mapping International.

Having spent more than 10 years hiring, and finding jobs for, technical communicators and learning professionals, Elizabeth is well aware of the lack of suitable short training programs in Australia and New Zealand. She was a member of the Advisory Panel for the Swinburne Graduate Diploma in Social Scence (Technical Communication).  Elizabeth's background is well suited to this path as she has a lifelong interest in learning and teaching and has published a number of papers.  Initially studying to become a secondary teacher, she briefly taught Mathematics at TAFE and was a researcher at La Trobe University. Here she worked on a project examining how computers could be used to aid the development of thinking skills using the early PCs and the first Macintosh computer. Later she was involved in the development of the first competency based IT training program for staff at the Kent Brewery (CUB) – a forerunner to the current AQTF.

Leaving education, she became interested in business process improvement, eventually becoming the Quality Director for Citigroup Australia before moving into an audit role.  Demonstrating her belief in the need for lifelong education, she has completed an MBA and Master of Professional Accounting.