

How to Spot an Extroverted Technical Writer and Other Mythological Creatures

BY STEPHANIE WHITLOW

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was attending a lunch and learn where the presentation topic was personality assessments. I was intrigued. I had heard I might be an extrovert because I had continuous social engagements, days filled to bursting with activities, and collections of friends from all walks of life. More importantly, the presentation introduced me to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). At this point, I did what any extrovert would do, I started asking rapid-fire questions of the speaker. Where did you learn about this? How can you use this in your job? I had a million questions. After quizzing the speaker and others mercilessly, I found a training class and became an MBTI Certified Facilitator. At this point, everything started falling into place, except for one thing—my profession.

I enjoy technical writing—first and foremost, the writing itself, but I also dearly love working with a team, attending project meetings, interviewing subject matter experts, and even facilitating group review sessions. I never got the impression that I was a stranger in a strange land until I attended an MBTI training workshop. Everyone around me was an instructional designer, facilitator, or trainer – I was the only technical writer there! After the training, I had a greater sense of who I was and I started to wonder, was I supposed to be in this profession? Was I the only white horse with a horn on the team? Was I a pixie causing mischief in meetings? Or could I be a thunderbird flapping around the office?

Of course, mythical creatures are just that—mythical, but after an unofficial poll taken on LinkedIn, I found that my choice in professions was not common among extroverts. From a college technical writing course I

stumbled into as an elective to beginning my profession in software documentation, I never realized that it was such a solitary calling. I began my professional career in a more metropolitan area, focusing on software related to banking and medicine. In this role, most of my counterparts were outgoing. Next, I moved to a city that was mostly government contracting, where I worked with other technical writers and, well ... rocket scientists. The writing positions I held in my new city didn't seem to fit me anymore and I couldn't understand why. After all, I was working with technical writers! These were my people, right? Well, yes and no.

Acknowledging Differences

We were all writers, yes. But you can spot an extroverted technical writer because they are not quiet, observant, and intensely detailed people. The extroverted writer is more often boisterous, energetic, and big-picture oriented. So, despite our common love of language, process, and the helpful written word, I did not *identify as* an introvert like most of my colleagues.

At this point, I thought back to my MBTI training. I still loved the profession and wanted to write, but more importantly, I wanted to interact with my fellow writers, because for me, conversation and personal interactions are like air. I need them. However, I realized that the other writers did not need this constant stimulation to thrive. They were more reserved and preferred quiet concentration to constant interaction. I was the odd one out, and it quickly became apparent that I was the one who would have to acclimate.

The professional world is truly geared toward extroverts with open office plans, team projects, and mandatory presentations. This openness feels natural to an extrovert who is comfortable engaging in group conversations and involving others in their lives to create a common bond. Extroverts adapt to change readily. For example, is the department being reorganized? The extrovert not only has the inside scoop but they lead the charge in helping everyone adapt. The boss can't attend the conference? An extrovert is ready to attend at a moment's notice and even join the social gatherings afterwards. Those who gain energy from being social love to explore and talk through complicated tasks (it's their way of thinking!). Appreciation can be shown to them by allowing them to dive into projects and encourage their enthusiasm. As Susan Cain wrote in *Quiet*, extroverts prefer more stimulating environments because the excitement therein creates a dopamine response. An extroverted temperament includes appreciating and adapting to constant change (especially if they are in charge of it), and absorbing all the new experiences that meeting people and transitional situations can provide. With seemingly boundless energy, those who identify as extroverts may want everyone to be part of the tribe – as a friend, colleague, boss, or employee - and will do their best to create a connection because they want a harmonious team.

Finding Common Ground

Bridging the gap between these two types may mean that some accommodations need to be made between both personality types. In her book, *The Genius of Opposites*, Dr. Jennifer B. Kahnweiler identifies five ways to create balanced relationships. First, opposites need to understand each other, a step called “Accept the Alien.” The second step, “Bring on the Battles” involves understanding that disagreements and challenges bring about solutions. “Casting the Character” is the third step and requires that the introvert/extrovert pair know which roles each will play to bring out the best in each. A fourth step includes creating mutual respect and friendships to “Destroy the Dislike.” And the fifth and final step notes that “Each Can't Offer Everything”, and so each party must understand what the other can provide and use those strengths to create success. Great examples of the opposites who created success together are most notably; Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, and Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

After obtaining my MBTI certification, I started noticing how my technical writing partners and I interacted. Sensing when they needed to be left alone and when I could bound into their offices; we complimented each other and created great work during our partnerships. As far as managers went,

most of mine identified as introverts; however, we seldom had conflicts. Those managers knew how to bring out the best in each member of the team by observing and listening to us. For the introverts, they could cloister into offices or work remotely to provide their best work for the team. For the extroverts, they were allowed to roam the office (within reason) and volunteered to represent the group in meetings and give presentations. With clients and customers, the introverted among us would survey the room, and provide a strategy to give them exactly what they needed and in the way they needed it. Introverted clients preferred to see everything in writing with specific details and the extroverts wanted the same information, only they appreciated a phone call or face-to-face meeting to discuss the details.

Appreciating Differences

The differences between introverts and extroverts are well documented—stimulation vs. over-stimulation, quiet vs. noisy, social vs. reserved—but there are a few similarities that have brought both those who identify as introverts and those who identify as extroverts together. Among those is that both personality types in the field of technical writing came to the profession because they love to write. Both introverts and extroverts want to convey information and improve the understanding of a product or service.

Technical writers with these two personality types may approach a situation differently—one enjoying more of the conversation and collaboration and one enjoying the solitary tasks of research and writing. One may be better at gaining subject matter expert buy-in and seeing an overview of what needs to be accomplished while the other may be best at details, such as grammar and editing. Though meetings and work events will find writers with these two preferences being very social, the degree and frequency will differ. Extroverts will choose large circles of acquaintances to add to their networks while introverts may have fewer, but much stronger, connections.

The introverted coworkers I've worked with in the past have some theories about our ability to work well together. One contends that research and planning are her strong suits while reporting on the final project is mine. We work in concert to provide a better understanding to our audience. Another, as an introvert, also has a greater grasp of the engineering mindset and can focus on specific terminology. Conversely, being an extrovert, I can leverage my skill sets to translate our work into more user-friendly terms, thereby allowing non-engineer readers to grasp the concepts.

Situations arise where these partnerships do experience disagreement and any altercations can best be contained by communication, negotiation, and finding balance. Extroverts have no problem communicating their needs

and introverts have no issue with listening; however, these two must express what they need.

Conflict:

Extrovert: I need someone to bounce ideas off of and since we're on the same team, you understand what is required (without further explanation) of the project.

Introvert: I need down time after the meeting and a chance to process the information we've received on the project before I can discuss it with you.

Compromise:

Extrovert: Let's make an appointment for 3:00 this afternoon to discuss. I will email you my thoughts on this project.

Introvert: I will review your notes and mine and we can make a list of what needs to be done.

Conclusion:

The extrovert has set a time to discuss the project and the introvert will have an opportunity to think through what points need to be considered; both can accomplish the greater task together.

Both expressed separate needs but they managed to negotiate a compromise. The extrovert has a time to "think out loud" and the introvert has a chance to process the information.

Coming Together

When I've worked with an introvert, we usually accept the other's differences and appreciate that we are stronger together. A large part of that acceptance is the communication channel, how best to share information—verbally, in writing, or through white board diagrams. Finding an appropriate way to communicate relieves the introvert from having to respond quickly without having the chance to gather their thoughts. Understand that small talk is draining to introverts while invigorating to extroverts. A good compromise is to have the introverts call time when they're feeling drained and for the extroverts to have meaningful discussion topics in mind when speaking with a fellow technical communicator.

Being an extrovert in what, by all accounts, seems to be an introverted profession has been an exercise in understanding all temperaments. For years, I bounded through meetings, talking over my contemplative counterparts, intruded past closed doors, and started talking without preamble, not giving my quieter colleagues a chance to prepare for the onslaught of my presence. Vibrant and animated small talk pervaded my mornings as I found unsuspecting and usually

Table 1. Personality terms and definitions from www.myers-briggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/.

Terms	Definitions
MBTI	Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is a personality assessment created by Isabel Briggs Myers, and her mother, Katharine Briggs and is based on the theories of psychiatrist Carl Jung. A certification to administer the assessment is available.
Identify (as)	Depending on the results of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment, an individual may categorize themselves as introvert or extrovert.
Preferences	An inclination towards different interests, different ways of behaving, and different ways of seeing the world.
Traits	Patterns of behavior that define an individual's personality characteristics.
Type	Personality type is what you prefer when you are using your mind or focusing your attention.

half-awake coworkers at the coffee pot. Being such a morning person and so happy to be around my fellow writers, I didn't realize that they needed a little time to acclimate. Now, I understand. I receive long emails and many details about projects and I respond in kind. I instant message my counterparts and ask if they have a minute before I spring over to their desks in my usual hyperactive manner.

A love of process and the written word, as well as an extroverted personality and the Myers-Briggs training, allows me to see the profession of technical writing from a unique perspective. Extroverted technical writers may seem disruptive to the team, but their vitality can propel the group through tough projects and their energy is often contagious. Each Myers-Briggs Personality type brings something specific to the field of technical communication and each is needed for balance. The more knowledge we have about each's personality traits, the better we can work together and learn how to build a successful team. And if you find you have a unicorn or any other mythical creature in your midst, let them know you've spotted them and that you know their intentions are good. **i**



STEPHANIE WHITLOW's background has been in software and hardware documentation and she recently added social media marketing to her repertoire. She recently started a freelance writing and consulting business called Hyper Writer, LLC. Stephanie holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and obtained her Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) Certification in 2014. Her volunteer efforts include non-profit grant writing and hosting round-table discussions, workshops, and presentations on resume basics. Stephanie lives on three acres outside of Huntsville, AL, with an intuitive husband, three extroverted dogs and one introverted cat.