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**LAJM INTERVIEW:
CONNIE LEAS ON TECHNICAL WRITING**

Robert Root

Editor's Note

Connie Leas is presently a free-lance technical writer working out of her home in Northville, but at the time of this interview, September 15, 1986, she was employed by ADP (Automatic Data Processing) to write manuals and materials for their Interactive Personnel and Payroll (IPP) computer program. IPP is a data base storing a range of information on personnel working for ADP's client firms, including payroll information used in an automatic payroll system. Her first assignment was to produce the IPP user's manual, a guide for personnel department staff and payroll data entry clerks. She was also asked to write a manual of the same program for salespeople who needed, as she says, "to demonstrate all the whistles and bells of IPP." In addition she was working on both an internal reference manual for account executives and a sales order tracking program with which regional sales managers and administrators could follow a sales order from beginning to end.

Prior to her employment at ADP, she was a technical writer for XMCo, working on military training programs and manuals for products from such companies as General Motors and Jet Propulsion Laboratories. It was her first tech writing job. Nothing in her earlier life had prepared her to be a technical writer except school assignments and writing experience with the Cooperative Extension Service and the Fenton Independent. For the Extension Service, teaching people in inner-city Detroit to garden, she had repeatedly found herself writing manuals, but she had little previous experience with computers. The ADP program, involving a cipher-code system, was something she had to learn in order to write the manual, both in the sense of the subject of her writing, and in the process of composing itself, since the manual was composed, typeset, and printed at ADP.

The interview was conducted at ADP offices in Ann Arbor, in a crowded conference room just off a large room broken up by a labyrinth of movable half-walls and open work stations, each with a computer terminal, most busily occupied. A muted but constant hum punctuated by random buzzes and beeps served as a background to the conversation.

On Her Background in Writing

I always wrote things. [At the Cooperative Extension Service] I always looked at all problems as if the solution was "What they need is a manual," and I'd always be writing a manual for something. That's the ultimate solution for things. Anyway I like to do it. I did have some experience for a year as a stringer for the Fenton Independent, writing weekly features on gardening or people who heat their homes with wood or women working outside the home. But I have a master's degree in Entomology, the study of insects. I always did a lot of writing in school. I always got A's. I found that I could organize material well and get the big picture quickly. I was the only person I ever knew at school who liked doing reports. Everybody would groan and complain and carry on-- I'd think, "Boy, easy A." And that's pretty much the way I looked at it. So I knew I liked writing reports and that I didn't mind doing it on sort of boring subjects. Maybe boring isn't the word. I don't need to do creative writing. Writing about how to do things is fine with me.

Just practicing doing anything you get better at it, and all the paper writing you do in college is just excellent preparation, no matter what you're doing or what you're writing about. Writing papers makes you organize your thoughts, makes you think about the big picture and "how am I going to say this?" and "what order should I put this in?" and "shall I leave this in or take it

out?," those kinds of questions. I'm assuming that's how I got so I could do it easily because I do do it easily. I'm assuming that a lot of that is from practice but maybe it's from doing it and then learning in that process. By being forced to do that in school you learn that that's something you're good at. That may be part of it too. Here's something I could always do easily and people always gave me A's, so I thought, this is something I should continue doing.

On Getting to Know the Subject

[To start working on the project] I would read anything that anybody has for me to read to try to get the big picture. Usually that's real important for me, just to get the whole concept of what is it they're trying to accomplish here and how it works. Then the things that I don't understand about the big picture I nag people a lot--I ask a lot of questions.

You can't quite do that with the military. They will give you cut-and-dried how they want it. They've got their format down and you pretty much have to follow that, but you can do pretty much what you want with the content. I didn't talk to people who drive tanks, in this case, but I used myself as a test. If I didn't understand it, I tried to make it understandable. I do that all the time. We were doing trucks and I was given certain components and systems. I had to learn about the fuel system for this truck and in particular this fuel injection pump which was a really tricky mechanism and so I spent a lot of time with engineers over at General Motors.

[If you didn't steep yourself in that] you end up with really inaccurate stuff, really bad stuff, stuff that's wrong. If you don't understand it really well, you can't write it. Nobody else can understand it because it's obvious that you

don't understand it. It's real important to me that I understand it because it's really hard to write about if you don't.

One of the really neat things that I like about tech writing is it's real challenging from the standpoint that you have to learn the subject. I'm forced into this computer world that I don't feel very comfortable with but I'm forced to live with it. I really like the challenge of having to master these subjects. With the truck I had to learn about the fuel system; I took a steering column apart and put it back together there in my office. The other thing I had to do with my other job was validate what I did. That means we have to try out our training program on the actual marines, so I spent two weeks at Camp Le Jeune on the platform in front of a classroom of marines teaching them all the stuff I'd written. So you are up against it--the truth will come out.

I know of someone working on a manual who pretty much copied a whole bunch of stuff out of another book and hadn't the foggiest notion what he was writing about and didn't question anything. There were differences between the book he'd been using and the actual transmission and he hadn't bothered to check this out. He did terrible work because he just tried to get it done. You can fill up the paper with words and it looks like you've done your job but it all comes back to haunt you. He had to get down there and get under the truck. He would never do that, but you have to do that. That's what makes it kind of interesting. Otherwise you're just a scribe copying a bunch of stuff.

Getting Started

I'm having a little trouble getting started with [the sales manual]. I made an outline of how I think it should go, what should be in the book. If I feel kind of stumped about exactly what should go in there and I haven't talked to enough salespeople yet, and I'm just kind of bogged down, haven't gotten it together, then I'll just start working on something that I know ought to be in there and just start plugging away on that. In the meantime I'll talk to more people and things will fall into place a little more. With the big user's manual I wrote several outlines; the more I'd learn about it I'd keep changing the outline. I'd write an outline, then start working on it, then the scales would be removed from my eyes. I'd think you have to start with an outline. You have to start with a picture of what it is you're trying to communicate and then you just start filling in all the details.

My notetaking mostly consists of questions that I have to ask people. The way I did the User's Guide, I decided I would do every single thing that could be done in this whole thing, every command, so I just went through it from the top. There's a command chart in there. I did every single command. I put the command in and said, "Well, we'll see what happens." So in that process I would print something out, make something happen, pretend I'm a user and I'm going to enter some payroll information, and some really goofy things would happen. I'd say, "I don't understand this," so I'd take the printout and go around to people and say, "What is this? What does it mean? Explain this to me." I'd scribble questions all over things that I'd write and then scribble in the answers. My notes either consist of questions and people's answers to those questions or outlines--outline this, outline that.

The creative part is organizing it and it's the important part because your reader has to be able to find things and it has to be organized in some kind of logical way, in an easy-to-find format. I don't outline in any kind of a formal sense way like you're taught in school.

At XMCo, where you have to write about principles of operation, I would use a lot of research material. I had to write about the principles of operation of a fuel system. Probably in that case I would get all my research materials together and make up all the parts that I thought were applicable to what I wanted to do and then string them all together. I'd gather all the material I could, and read it all, and get a feel to the different components that would, say, be in that fuel system, and decide how I want to organize it, and then stack them up and reshuffle everything into some kind of order.

[With the IPP user's guide] I tried to start at the beginning because it kind of forces you to get going. I did one introduction first and then I completely rewrote it after I got done. I started at the beginning and I changed it a lot. I decided to stick more sections up front and then I'd go back. I changed it a lot as I went along but I think it's important just to start. You can sit around mulling something forever and you're never going to have how it's going to work out all worked up completely before you start, so you just have to get started, and it all starts to fall in place and you can change it. That's how I work and I find that I can get done a lot faster just not worrying about knowing everything before you start but just going ahead and then you learn it as you go. You can always go back and change it and that's a big thing that I do.

On Discovering and Composing

I always compose it at the terminal. The creative part of tech writing is organizing the stuff, making decisions about what you're going to put in it and how you're going to set it up, the graphics part and that sort of thing. There's actually very little that you do that you have to think about how you're going to word something, your actual prose. Every now and then I'll get stuck but there's not a lot of mulling that goes on. A lot of times you're just writing what's on a screen perhaps. Or you can be doing steps: do this, do this, do that. That's pretty straightforward.

The stuff that requires some working on your wording is maybe some introductory thing or the purpose of something or how you'd use something or that kind of thing. So it's pretty easy to put it right in--the trick is to figure out how you're going to do it plus the research--understanding it yourself, nagging people to help you.

You need to sort of have an idea of what you imagine the big picture is but you probably don't begin to know what the details are and so what you do--what I do--is, just start. And then in the process I begin to learn. Of course you might just change the whole format. In fact, it always happens: I get it in my mind, "Well, I'm going to do this, this, and this" and once I get started I think, "God, that was a stupid idea" and I'll completely change it. But you can't know that stuff ahead of time. You can't sit there and get it perfectly in your head before you start because you can't know it all before you start; you're learning about the thing you're writing about usually while you're writing about it. In the writing of it you're discovering, "Oh, my god, there's this whole piece in here I don't understand." The writing of something will make you realize that there's

pieces of it you don't get. The writing just raises more questions and so you're writing and researching at the same time.

So anyway I'm a believer in just jumping in and say you don't have all the facts--well, you'll learn them sooner or later. The writing of it surfaces all that stuff. So you research as you go. I revise a lot as I go; there's no doubt about it--I'm learning as I'm writing.

Considerations of Audience and Voice

For the user's guide I think you'd have to write to the lowest level, so I took myself as an example and I tried to make it comprehensible to myself so that I could understand it. That was pretty safe. The internal reference manual is a lot harder because I don't know what kind of background they're from, how much they know. A lot of them come from the ADP Automatic Payroll System; they all know more than I do, and that's real hard deciding what to include. What I do in a case like that is I just talk to a lot of them. I'm not at all hesitant about talking to people.

There were some stock phrases that we were forced to use for the army that I would never utter on my own. One of them was, "impartation of information." I would never say this but they wanted it. I pretty much try to write the way I speak. I don't like manuals that are cute or too friendly. I just use my own instincts. This is just business. They just want to learn how to do it--they don't particularly want to be entertained, just "show me how to do this with the fewest amount of words."

I've seen some manuals where people try to be real witty and kind of breezy and super-friendly and stuff like that, and that just sort of puts me off. I usually refer to the user as "you", and instead of "the system" I call it "IPP", like it's this friendly group of people who will be sending the message back. I had to make a decision about that but it's the sort of thing that I don't think too much about. I pretty much do try to write the way I talk and try to remember not to make it abstract but to make it direct. "You do this" and "You do that" if you're directing them, or "If you do this, IPP will do that." That sort of thing. It's all personal preference--I never went to school for this stuff.

Revising

I always make hard copies. For one thing what I see at the terminal is not formatted into paragraphs and stuff, although I can compile it and make it run for me on the terminal so that it's in paragraphs. I print it off so that I can mull it over and take my red pencil and scribble all over it and change things.

With this I developed a whole book, I put tabs in it and everything, and I found myself a bunch of people, not end-users but people who work with end-users, who are kind of out in the trenches, and asked them to review it. We had a conference where I got together with all those people and spent a whole day going over it and they all gave me suggestions--they were real helpful. I made a lot of changes based on their suggestions.

I just kind of went from start to finish and when I got that over with I sent it out to be reviewed and I made all the revisions and that was that. It wasn't a lot of mulling over that one. I put in everything I knew to put in. I think I probably left some things out but I will make revisions later. That's never much

of an issue for me. I could have gone over it and probably have improved the writing and a whole lot of things, but you're so sick of it by then that you can't stand playing with it forever. It needs to get out into the field. And I don't tinker around with things very much, tweaking and that sort of thing, although I'm sure it would help. I do a little bit, usually when you write the thing and then you print it off; that's when I do most of my tweaking.

When I revised [the manual], I was putting in the changes and revisions that other people had made. I really took them seriously and put all that in and that was what the revisions consisted of, what my reviewers suggested. I pretty much accommodated every one of them because I figured they knew what they were talking about. They're out there in the field and they sure knew it better than I did.

Technical Language and Graphics

I really worked hard at holding the verbiage down . Most people--I use myself as an example--look first at the examples or a picture, if you're building something, to see if you can figure it out just by the picture. So I'm big on putting in examples; if they get hung up, if they can't figure out the example, then they'll read the other stuff. I pretty much designed the book so that people could figure it out intuitively as much as possible. People don't like to read a lot of stuff.

I try real hard not to use jargon. After you're in the environment for awhile--I mean, I'm in the environment of this program; I'm not an outsider anymore--then the terms begin to feel normal and commonplace and I can see where you might start using jargon not knowing you were using it, but I try very hard not to use it.

You don't have to use certain kinds of terms, only if they're required to get the meaning across. With the military, you did a little bit more because they demanded it. You had to define what things were. You assumed nobody knew anything, so you weren't really talking to an in-group of mechanics--you were talking to people with seventh-grade educations.

There isn't a whole lot of style in something like this, or it doesn't seem to me that there is. There're a lot of examples: there's step one, two, three, four, and very little else. There's not a lot of space for style, although if you read it you would discover that there is a certain kind of style. I'm not objective enough to see it.

I like that I said, "This hierarchy is like a road map that helps you get from one place to another." I sort of felt that was a good analogy. I didn't agonize over my wording in this--I just tried to get the thing done. Every now and then I would get to a paragraph or something that would really give me trouble and I would spend a lot of time on it. But not very often.

Nobody would start at the beginning of the manual and read to the end. When a person uses it they're just looking for something, how to do something, and I tried to make it really flexible. This tab system is an idea I had. At the

beginning of each big tab thing there's a road map which shows what's in that section and a page number--these are all the commands.

This drawing of the Personnel Data Entry Command was actually good work, although maybe not from a writing standpoint. These were so hard for me to understand, when you would use these different commands, and I just had to make a drawing myself so I could understand how it worked. And so I did it for myself and I thought, "Well, probably other people needed these as well." Any graphics help.

I generally respond positively where there're lots of pictures and diagrams, where it's visually easy, where your eye can find the main heading. I think that's really important, where you don't see big long paragraphs. The old manual seemed to me just this barrage of paragraph after paragraph after paragraph. People want to know what they're doing without a lot of verbiage. I don't think manuals should say, "First you put in this and the computer will do this, then you do this, and the computer will do this." That's too stilted. I just figure an example will show you better, where you put in this and the computer does this. I'm a big one on counting on people's intuition.

On Being a Technical Writer

I wish I was a big graphics person because I think you're really a lot better off if you can do something in a graphic form rather than something that you read.

I actually think I'm a good tech writer from the standpoint that the users like what I do. I think I organize things well. I've been doing it four years and

I'm sure the longer I do it, the more experience I get with graphics and production, the more tricks I'll get. The production end of it is really no small thing, and then there's a lot of it that's mechanical, just being a typist. A lot of what's required in the book is examples and so you're just copying what was on a computer screen.

I don't think it affects my world view, [although] I don't always leave it at the office. With this user's guide I used to lay awake at night problem solving with it, thinking how I was going to do this, how I was going to do that. I don't know if it's more or less than any other writer, but there are lots of decisions to be made, lots of different ways you can do things and so you're a lot of the time deciding what to leave out and what to put in and where to put something and how to do it. It's probably the same as any other writing.