“Creative Writing versus Technical Writing”

It is often difficult to distinguish the differences and similarities between Technical Writing and Creative Writing. Writing is writing and good writing is creative writing. If we accept, however, that Technical Writing exists in its own category, with Creative Writing in another, how can we categorize creative Technical writing? One way to explore the differences and similarities between Technical Writing and Creative Writing is to analyze them with regard to subject, purpose, audience and voice. Even a rudimentary analysis of these two writing styles in terms of subject, purpose, audience and voice will expose the fact that Creative Writing encompasses a broader scope of writing than Technical Writing, with fewer limitations.

The subject and purpose in Technical Writing and Creative Writing differ in that Technical Writing is always nonfiction, with the purpose of educating or instructing, while Creative Writing can be fiction, nonfiction, or a combination of both, and can serve any purpose. Creative Writing is nonrestrictive, encompassing goals from education to entertainment. In contrast, Technical Writing is never meant to entertain, though it can be entertaining at times, depending on the subject, purpose, and audience being addressed. Entertaining Technical Writing can be considered creative Technical Writing.

Creative Writing subjects can be fiction, nonfiction, or a combination of both, as is usually the case with biographies. Technical Writing focuses on nonfiction, technical procedures, methods, or processes. Creative Writing can be about any subject, from fantastical stories of Mickey Mouse to hard-boiled detective stories about corrupt policemen. Technical Writing about Mickey Mouse might include a user manual about a Mickey Mouse website, telephone or video game, or some back-end documentation about an interactive Mickey Mouse website.

Just as the subject of Technical Writing is limited to nonfiction, with the purpose of educating or instructing, the audience in Technical Writing is limited as well. The audience for Technical Writing can be divided into a technical and a non-technical audience, often defined by how this audience understands—or is trying to understand—the technical subject being presented in the writing. Test procedures, speculation documents, abstracts, flow charts and installation manuals usually address a technically proficient audience. User manuals, online help materials and abstracts address a semi-technical or non-technical audience.

In Creative Writing, audiences tend to be divided among age, hobby, taste, or interest. The audience that enjoys romance is addressed in Romance novels, while the audience that enjoys space exploration, or futuristic technology, gets addressed in Science Fiction. In short, the audience in Creative Writing is far from being neatly divided among technical and non-technical. Instead, it is divided into numerous categories based on hobby, interest, or whatever demographic niches a publisher or literary agent decides to fabricate. Essentially, the audience in Creative Writing is unlimited.

Since the subject, purpose, and audience being addressed in Technical Writing are limited to nonfiction, with the
purpose of instructing or educating a technical or non-technical audience about technical subjects, the voice used to accomplish this goal is restricted. Clarity, brevity, and accuracy are integral to the voice being used in Technical Writing, especially when the writing addresses complex technical material. When addressing a non-technical audience, a clear and understandable voice must still be used in order to make difficult, technical material more comprehensible. The voice for addressing a technical audience must be clear, brief, and accurate. In Technical Writing, there is little room for salient descriptions that could potentially confuse the reader. User manuals and online help material must be understandable to meet the needs of either a technical or non-technical audience. There exists little room in Technical Writing for slang, colorful metaphors, or long, elegant modifiers.

In Creative Writing, clarity can serve its purpose (just ask Ernest Hemmingway, a writer famous for his terse-journalistic-writing-style), and so too can long descriptions, esoteric imagery, and whatever else serves the audience being addressed. In Creative Writing, the only rule (which really isn’t a rule, but a strong suggestion) about establishing a voice is that it appropriately serve the subject matter and audience for which it is being written.

In essence, Technical Writing and Creative Writing are different styles of writing, which address different subjects and audiences. While the purpose of Technical Writing is to educate or instruct about technical material, the purpose of Creative Writing is limitless. While Technical Writing is always non-fiction, and mostly used to educate or instruct, Creative Writing can be fiction, non-fiction, or a combination of the two, and can be used to educate or instruct. Though Technical Writing generally addresses a technical audience, Creative Writing can potentially do the same, as is often the case in science fiction: i.e. William Gibson’s Neuromancer, which coined the term ‘cyberspace’ addressed a very technical, computer literate audience. By the same token, Technical Writing audiences can be non-technical.

The Technical Writing voice must be clear, concise, and accurate, in order to express adequately, the subject matter and material being presented. Clarity and accuracy are not integral to a creative writing voice, though they can make the writing better, depending on authorial intent. (In the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne—who got paid by the page—brevity was not always necessary.

Since Creative Writing is much less limited than Technical Writing, it can be considered a broader writing category. In fact, Creative Writing can encompass Technical Writing, resulting in what could be deemed creative Technical Writing. This is the case when technical material gets presented in a unique manner to serve the purpose of educating or instructing its audience. However, despite the smaller sub-categorical size of Technical Writing, the style is expanding. With the ever-changing range of technological subjects and the broadening audience entering the Technological arena, the smaller, more restrictive category of Technical Writing is quickly expanding to meet the growing demands of a new information technology age.
Below are listed 7 essential steps for developing a user manual:

1. **Determine SUBJECT and PURPOSE.** (purpose helps to determine subject)

2. **Determine AUDIENCE.** (subject helps to determine audience)

3. **Determine VOICE.** (audience helps to determine voice)

4. **Determine CONTENT.**

5. **Create an OUTLINE.**

6. **WRITE.**

7. **EDIT and REVISE.**