

## Getting Started in Technical Writing

### Advice For Beginners & Wannabes

by Rhonda Bracey, Australia Chapter

In the past few months, I've been asked my advice by a number of people interested in pursuing technical writing as a career. I'm not sure why I was asked, whether I was the only person asked, or whether the information I provided was helpful. This article is a summary of my replies.

#### What Do I Need On My Résumé?

There are several skills that I tell people are absolutely essential. First, you must be able to write concisely and clearly and without being condescending in the process. Second, you must be pedantic about spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formatting. Third, you need solid editing skills, and be able to show that not only can you edit someone else's work but that you also can edit your own. Fourth, a love of reading; I firmly believe that reading a wide range of materials makes for better writing.

Advertised positions for tech writers too often emphasize the software tools you'd be expected to use — an emphasis that's usually at the expense of writing skills. In my opinion, it is far more important to be a good writer and negotiator; if you have one or two software packages under your belt, then learning the others is not a difficult or insurmountable task. Convincing employers of this should be part of your arsenal of negotiation skills.

This isn't to discount the value of computer skills, though. Technical writers need to have excellent computer skills in general when they're entering the field. It's a reasonable expectation when you think about it. If you're struggling with the concept of using a mouse,

are you really the ideal person to be writing documentation for network servers?

To find out what software packages potential employers will be looking for on your résumé, read job postings for technical writer positions (at any level). Most employers look for excellent (even expert-level) skills in desktop publishing (*Quark Xpress*, *PageMaker*, *InDesign*), word processing (*Word*, *FrameMaker*), help authoring (*RoboHelp*, *ForeHelp*, *HDK*), graphics (*Paint Shop Pro*, *PhotoShop*, *Visio*), Web authoring with HTML or some Web design package (*DreamWeaver*, *HomeSite*), and other skills (CSS, JavaScript, XML, etc.). This is not to say that you need to develop proficiencies in all of these at once, but it won't hurt to start building some expertise in one package/skill in each category.

#### Background

Writers who majored in journalism are experienced in searching out the kernel of truth in any story, and I personally think journalism is a solid background for tech writing. Typically, tech writers seem to fall into this game from some other job (e.g., teaching, quality assurance, help desk), often because they're the only person in the organization who enjoys writing procedures, policies, and so on. Bottom line: Your background is nowhere near as important as your skills.

**Soft skills.** Beyond the so-called hard skills I talked about earlier (software proficiencies, ability to edit, etc.), there are a number of

#### INSIDE

Gray Matter ..... 2

Writer's  
Toolkit ..... 6

Solitary  
Refinement ..... 8

...See Cover Story on page 3

## Cover Story...continued from page 1

other skills that employers look for, including the ability to:

- Learn quickly and continue learning
- Negotiate to get reviews done and done on time
- Organize projects, time, and information
- Define the audience for which you are writing
- Interpret technical information and translate it into plain, simple, jargon-free language
- Interview subject matter experts to find out what you and your audience need to know in order to use your company's product(s)

### What Industries Could I Work In?

Any industry with a set of procedures, instructions, and so forth can use a tech writer. The problem is, most of them don't know it and work on the premise that "The receptionist took some composition classes and she's not busy at the moment, so she can do it...".

Convincing businesses that it may be cheaper to get a tech writer to do the job properly is still hard. While a lot of work is available in software documentation and many Web sites feature online documentation, don't forget that the tractor manual has to be written, as do the instructions for operating the CD/radio/cassette player in cars, or the instructions for the treatment of snake bite.

Talk to people who work in different industries, starting with friends and family, then their colleagues. You will be surprised how your network of contacts will grow and how much you will learn. You also can look through the article archives of different organizations or industries on the Internet to get a sense of the writing needs in different industries. For example, software writing tends to be fast and loose because of rapid development cycles, whereas defense contract writing tends to be slow and meticulous with rigid adherence to specific standards.

### How Do I Get Work?

In a word: networking! Unless they're a recluse, *everybody* has a network they can use when they're looking for work. What you don't know is who knows someone who may be looking for someone like you. If you can pick up work through word of mouth, you're very lucky as it is the *best* advertisement. But it also can work against you — never "burn" or bad mouth anybody. Not only is it unprofessional, but it could prevent you from getting work.

When you're first starting out, you may need to use recruitment agencies in order to get those first assignments that will help establish your reputation. Poll more experienced technical writers and you'll get a mixed bag of responses. Some people have told me that if they relied on recruiters to find them work, and hadn't done networking of their own, they wouldn't have worked at all for the past few years. Others have had extraordinarily good luck with them and use recruiters consistently to find new permanent or contract positions.

It can't hurt to have your résumé posted with some recruiters because sometimes they're the only way that you can find jobs with the primo employers in your area. But you should do so as a complement to your own networking efforts, not instead of.

**Populating your network.** The list that follows particularly applies to students, but almost everyone else can get some ideas from it.

- Family — they're your biggest advocates and they all know people through their jobs and extracurricular activities and hobbies
- Friends
- Former co-workers
- Former bosses
- Professionals you meet from any field you come in contact with — anyone from your dentist to your hair stylist may know someone with a business that needs your skills

...See Cover Story on page 4

Cover Story...continued from page 3

- Church contacts
- Former teachers, professors, and school advisors
- Sport and hobby contacts

## Promoting Yourself To Your Network

Self-promotion can be exceedingly uncomfortable for a lot of people at first. After being nagged at by our parents to not be self-centered, networking can be difficult because it requires you to talk frequently and confidently about what you can and want to do.

Additionally, there are other things you can do to get your name out to a wider circle of possibilities:

- Print business cards (if you can afford it) that include your Web site address (if you have one), and a few bullet points on the back that list your skills or areas of expertise. Then make sure you always have some with you to hand out when opportunities arise.
- Bulletproof your résumé so it's free of misspellings, typos, punctuation errors, formatting faux pas, and grammar gaffes.
- Create a Web site with your résumé and work samples, particularly if you're promoting HTML skills on your résumé and don't have any other examples of Web work.
- Create a portfolio of the best work (writing, editing, graphics, etc.) that you've done.
- E-mail your contacts if you are looking for work and give them permission to forward your name on to others when they hear of an opportunity.
- Keep a good, up-to-date contact list and let the people on that list know when you're available for work and where your résumé can be found online.
- Use employment ads to build your contact list even if the ads you find are not for tech writers. Sometimes a big push to hire engineers or software developers now can mean a need for technical writers later.

## Mind Your Manners When You Network

Memo to all aspiring tech writers: *If you write or e-mail someone to ask them for their advice, thank them (promptly) for the time and effort they put into answering your request.*

For contractors who bill at an hourly rate, our well-thought-out replies to your questions actually cost us time and money. I don't begrudge either as I think it's important to help newcomers through some of the initial learning humps, but it's nice to receive acknowledgment of the effort. Besides, if I am looking for someone to do some overflow work for me, you can bet the person who didn't thank me for my advice will be bottom on my list!

## How Can I Get Experience?

Sure, you can wait for your first job, but so often people want experience and it becomes a vicious circle. How do you get a job without experience and how do you get experience without a job?

**Volunteer work.** Every community organization survives on volunteers, including the ones you already belong to. Even if you don't think you have anything to offer, you're wrong! I've never known any organization to turn away a volunteer; if you can help in your areas of expertise (or where you want to get expertise) then all the better. Do they need a Web site? Someone to edit the newsletter? Manage the membership database? When you start asking a group about its needs, it's easy to quickly see where you can build experience.

Many small community organizations are non-profit or at least strapped with very tight budgets, which prevents them from hiring someone with the skills they need for certain projects. Because their existing staff is already overloaded, no one may have the time (or interest) to develop the required skills — and so they hope that someone will turn up as a willing volunteer. Even if you don't think you know a lot, you may very well know more

## What Do Technical Writers Do?

- Procedures
- Instructions
- Policy documents
- Quality Management documentation (including quality procedures and the ISO 9001/2000 "Quality Manual")
- Web site design, management, and content writing
- Intranet design, management, and content development
- Computer- and Web-based training
- Marketing brochures and other collateral, such as white papers and fact sheets
- Corporate documentation style guides
- Document templates
- Forms (paper and online)
- PowerPoint presentations
- Online help

...See Cover Story on page 5

*Cover Story...continued from page 4*

about how to do a certain project than they do. Any volunteer work looks good on your résumé, and you'll likely get gushing thanks for something you thought was very simple because it's likely not simple for them.

Don't forget professional and student associations, too. If you want to get into tech writing, then volunteer on one of the student SIGs, or any other SIG or chapter of the STC.

**Write frequently.** Even if it's just for yourself, it hones your skills and makes you a better writer. After you've written something, put it aside for a while, then re-read it and edit it with fresh eyes. Each time you'll improve your technique.

If you don't know what to write about, the bookstores, libraries, and Web are filled with books and resources with writing prompts that range from the mildly creative to the downright outrageous. Any writing you do is better than doing none at all. For technical writing practice, try rewriting instructions for the video recorder or the programming options on the family phone (without looking at the original manual). We know of one writer who came up with some fairly creative cue cards to help teach her six-year-old niece how to use the VCR to record a show and the microwave to heat frozen meals.

Also practice brainstorming, and organizing ideas into logical groups/concept maps. In some circles, you can pay big money to learn this technique (they call it "information mapping").

## What Can I Expect To Earn?

Tech writers usually earn more than journalists, novelists, poets, and other creative writers. In fact, it is rumored that we are the highest paid writers of all. For an idea of salary rates in the U.S. and Canada, check:

- **Monster** (<http://www.monster.com>)
- **WinWriters annual salary survey** (<http://www.winwriters.com/salaryresults01.htm>)
- **Society for Technical Communication** (<http://www.stc.org/salary.html>)

## How Do I Learn More?

The Internet is full of articles, links, and sites dedicated to tech writing, but you need to wade through a lot to get the essentials. Start with

- **"Getting Started"** on the TechWr-L site (<http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/newbiegettingstarted.html>)
- **Suite101** ([http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/technical\\_writing/](http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/technical_writing/))

which should give you enough to get going. For an official description of the job of being a tech writer, see [http://www.fullfont.com/techwriter\\_desc.htm](http://www.fullfont.com/techwriter_desc.htm).

Don't forget the online discussion lists, such as TechWr-L (<http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/subscribercentral.html>) and HATT (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HATT>), and specific lists for the software tools you use. Join up and lurk for a while; it's amazing how much you'll learn over time! ❖

## What Do Technical Writers Do? [Cont'd]

- Training manuals
- Technical and/or functional specifications
- Competitive analyses
- Research and reporting
- Press releases
- Newsletter design, editing, and writing
- Tender/Quotation/EOI preparation
- Articles for trade magazines
- System administrator guides
- User guides
- Quick reference sheets
- Data sheets
- Readme files
- Installation guides
- Flowcharts and other graphics
- Usability and GUI testing and test plans