

TECH WRITING

Whether or not you were able to attend the Job Assist discussion on writing as a career, the following information may be useful to you if you are considering entering the diverse field of technical writing (or documentation specialist).

I will not try to define what cannot be narrowly defined. Let me say only that there are as many “types” of technical writing as there are industries and fields of knowledge. Many tech writer job descriptions even ask for skills in website design.

Basically, a tech writer is trying to create a bridge of understanding. On one side of a chasm of misunderstanding and miscommunication are the activities and outputs of the technical and/or scientific side of an enterprise or institution. Trying to figure out what those outputs mean to them are both the internal customers, the managerial or marketing sides, and the external customers or public audience. While there are many gifted communicators among the technicians and scientists, most are not so gifted, or at least not in English as we know it.

The JOB HUNT

If you are fortunate to have contacts in the desired industry or institution, sure, networking is the most successful way to go. If you are in my boat, you do not have those contacts. On your side is the fact that this region is HOT for technical positions. Unfortunately, the hottest area is in northern Virginia, as far from here as the Dulles Toll Rd. goes and beyond. If you have had a recent security clearance, ... well, you are not reading this, you are already hired. Otherwise, post your resume on Dice, Monster, and the Washington Post Career site.

Don't bother reading the newspapers' printed classified ads – job ads there advertise the company more than they advertise jobs. Most firms post jobs on their own site or on the technical sites.

“Headhunters” work for firms that can place you in temp to permanent positions within other firms. The headhunters you want will come to you if your posted resume contains the hot phrases their clients seek, and these folks' firms are paid by the client. Never pay a headhunter.

Tech Writing INFO

With the help of Google (is there any other really useful search engine?), you and your computer may access a wealth of information, much of it valid, on technical writing (or just about any other topic).

My own pick for the most readily useful single site, which talks more in terms of content management than tech writing, is <http://www.thecontentwrangler.com/>

The single most active, and perhaps single most useful resource is the international community that resides at <http://www.techwri.com/techwhirl/index.php3> .

The U of Iowa maintains a massive index of tech writer resources at <http://tc.eserver.org/dir/Resources/Writing/Technical-Writing>

The Society for Technical Communications has a discussion forum at <http://stcforum.org/> . Many of its chapters have their own website, including the Arlington-based Washington DC area chapter, at <http://www.stcwdc.org> and the Metro Baltimore chapter, at <http://mbstc.org> , which often has events in Columbia and near BWI. A window to a number of STC international sites is at <http://stc-on.org/> (You'll see references to "sig", or "special interest group." Perhaps I'm wrong about this, but <http://www.idratherbewriting.com/> seems oriented towards STC folks. You may find STC membership worth the modest cost. I joined for one year, found the topics at the DC chapter to be too tradesmith oriented, dull for me, and had no job interest or social need in meeting other tech writers – but you may find it one way to make contacts within firms.

Incidentally, a well written, clever Israeli technical writer forum, in English, is the Elephant, <http://www.elephant.org.il/>

With more interest in the computer science side of technical writing, the organization I have found to hold the most value (for me) is the Association for Computing Machinery www.acm.org . For something like \$100/yr, I get access to a vast library of technical books and courses. An extra \$100 or so opens up even more access to ACM's publications over the years, its digital library.

Of interest also, and I'm not sure if comprised mostly of STC members, is <http://www.idratherbewriting.com/>

PREPARATION

There are courses on technical writing, everything from four day wonders costing about \$2,500 from the Learning Tree, which may well throw too much stuff at you in too little time, to college courses (such as at Montgomery Community College, Rockville campus), to full programs elsewhere.

There is NO formal certification in technical writing – none really recognized by any employer – so do not be fooled by claims to that effect. Prior preparation in a field is your best knowledge entry. For example, for medical writing, courses in college-level biology and biochemistry are real credentials. For jobs in software

houses (where I've been employed since 2000), if you never coded and do not have a few in demand applications down pat, you are going to have a rough time.

For just about any tech writing field, my take is that, if you see a job that asks for either a highly specialized technical background OR a graduate degree in English, some agency or firm's H.R. department does not know what your future boss really needs. It is not an either/or matter. It is usually knowledge based PLUS a strong command of English (as is rarely taught these days in the U.S.).

SALARY

Oh yes, shall we talk money? You are unlikely to get rich, but you are not likely to starve either. Google your way to salary surveys, as done by the STC and others. Entry level may be around \$40K in this area, more with prior knowledge in the subject industry. Those in the business about 10 years or more may make over \$100K. (haven't reach that level – but then I'm a relative newcomer, this being at least my third career.) For those with a security clearance (ex-military, or for a tech firm that took you on, put you on non-sensitive jobs, and then secure a clearance, as perhaps Lockheed Martin might do), add another \$20K or so.

Here's to effective communications!

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