

Becoming a Technical Communicator

I encourage anyone who wants to break into Technical Writing or Technical Communication, to take at least one course in Technical Communication. This is where the methodology of technical communication is taught. Many believe that a degree in English and/or knowing how to string words, sentences, and paragraphs together is enough. It is not enough if one doesn't learn the methodology of creating technical documents.

I believe that anyone with a good command of English can be a good technical communicator if they learn to do the following:

1. Front-end audience analysis, You learn the purpose and the audience for the documentation.
2. You research to provide the information that satisfies the purpose for the intended audience.
3. You organize the information and present it in a form suitable for the purpose of the intended audience.
4. You do usability testing. You use reader(s) as representative sample(s) of the audience to test the documentation. You monitor and take notes to determine where the documentation works and where it doesn't work.

You must make it clear to participants that you are testing the documentation and not the participants. No matter how good you may be as a technical communicator, usability testing is the key to determining good documentation that works as intended.

5. You revise until the documentation works as intended.

I have seen technical documentation that looks good, gets signed off by managers who are not a part of those that will use the documentation, and yet the documentation does not work as intended. If you learn to do the five basic steps above, you can create good technical documentation that works.

A certificate in Technical Writing does not guarantee that you will obtain an entry level technical writer position, but you will know technical writing methodology and interview more confidently.

I started technical writing as a Senior Electronic Technician for an Applied Research Laboratory in Chicago, IL. I could always write well and was encouraged to do the writing mainly because I was the junior member among engineers with Masters and PhDs.

Later I moved to New York City and worked as a Computer Service Technician and then was hired as a Technical Writer by a technical publishing company for the aviation and aerospace industry for military contracts. I learned more about technical writing using the style guides used for the military and from senior technical writers. I learned in an environment where it was easy

to teach those with technical backgrounds and a flair for writing to become good technical writers.

Technology advanced to the extent that embedded software became a part of system design. This meant that detailed theory of operation, analysis, and troubleshooting skills were no longer as important for the technical writer because the software took care of such tasks. Technical writing thus became a lot easier. Although I had electrical and electronic technology diplomas, was very experienced as a technical writer for sophisticated military systems, and considered an expert, I was not likely to be considered a knowledgeable technical writer without a college degree.

I realized that the field would be flooded with English majors and other Liberal Arts majors and old school technical writers like myself, could have difficulty competing for assignments. Because I sold computer systems at one time, I realized that it was always the CEO and the CFO that made the decisions regarding buying a system. I surmised that much of the demand for technical writers would be in helping users to understand computer applications. It would be involved with keeping records in a database with accounting records being of the highest concern.

With many years of experience as a Technical Writer, I went back to school and got an Associates degree in Computer Programming, a BS degree in Business: Management Information Systems and Accounting, and a Master of Technical and Scientific Communication degree in the Professional area of Computers.

I presently consult and teach for an online university and know that it is important to have a good command of the English language and some technical knowledge about the topic you are writing about. The technical knowledge is mainly so you can talk to the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) without taking up too much of their time. You will know how to present your questions so they will be easily understood and answered by the SME. Technical communication methodology and a certificate or courses will help.

Because Technical Communication is a broad field, beginning and experienced Technical Communicators can get a lot out of the Website Design and Internet Marketing information at <http://JamesGraves.com>

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