

Technical communications

Warren Singer discusses the field of technical communications

*Interested in a career in technical writing?
Want to find out how to become involved
in technical communications? Read on.*

Technical Communications

Those involved in the field of technical communications have many different job titles. They may be called technical writers, technical authors, information architects, documentation specialists, or some other job title. What sets them apart as a profession are the following two key factors that are common to all professionals involved in technical communications:

- **Communications aspect** - technical communicators are primarily communicators. They interview developers, engineers and other subject matter experts, review existing documentation and explore user interfaces to obtain an understanding of the product or service that they need to document or communicate about. They communicate with end users, customers or other internal staff. This aspect of communicating with others in an organisation as well as with customers is a fundamental feature of technical communications.
- **Technical aspect** - the information that technical communicators attempt to communicate is primarily technical. This does not mean that is necessarily esoteric or complex, or understandable only by an engineer or someone with a scientific or technical background. On the contrary, almost any information that is factual, descriptive or procedural might be considered technical. For example, it may be something as simple as a company's new Health and Safety or Data Protection policy, or as complicated as a manual for a nuclear submarine. What distinguishes the role of the technical communicator is their ability to take complex, technical information and simplify, presenting this in a manner that is clear and easy to understand by the target audience, which in many cases will be your average consumer or reader, who will not have an in-depth understanding of the subject or a technical background.

Where do technical communicators work?

Technical communicators work in a wide range of industries and a diversity of businesses. For example: engineering, electronics, pharmaceuticals, chemistry, legal, medical, banking, finance, telecommunications, software design, e-commerce, gaming, utilities and energy companies, transport, aviation, shipping, mining, nuclear energy, the military, government, charities, non-profits — all these industries employ technical writers, or technical communicators as they are more appropriately called.

As part of your role, you may be asked to produce any of the following:

- User guides, online help, API documentation, technical diagrams and flowcharts
- Technical specifications, design specifications, proposals, business plans, business cases, proposal responses,
- White papers, policy documents, procedures and instructions
- Training material, e-learning material, videos, interactive demos
- Website material, customer communications - written and email letters
- And more...

You may also be responsible for administering or running a number of company systems, from Wikis and SharePoint sites, to intranets, content management systems and documentation portals.

These are only examples. The profession provides a rich and varied source of job roles and titles.

Looking towards the future of the profession

As information technology becomes more and more embedded within our culture and daily lives, the roles that the technical communicator can take on will continue to grow. The technology for presenting information is becoming more advanced, offering technical communicators the opportunity to use new media to present information to users, such as video, interactive demonstrations and e-learning, or through new channels, such as social media. The time of the old, printed technical manual that nobody every reads is passing as a new generation of technical communicators come on board, interested in exploring new technology and trying new methods to engage customers.

So, yes, perhaps nowadays people are not interested in reading a long-winded technical manual. We are all busy and lack time, and we are used to information being presented to us in bite-sized chunks.

Television and mobile devices, and now the availability of cheap handheld devices such as tablet PCs and e-readers, has meant that information is always available and on-tap. We suffer from information overload. The old model of the 300-page technical guide will not do.

Does that mean we abandon the technical documentation? Should we outsource it to India, where it can be produced for a fraction of the cost, or ask the engineers and developers to write it up in their spare time?

The answer is a definite *No*. Companies need their products and services documented - doing it badly or not doing it at all will only leave unhappy customers, increase customer support costs and reflect badly on the company. We just need to find innovative ways of presenting information in an interesting and useful way, so that users can engage with it rather than being put off by it. That is the challenge of successful information design. And who is better placed to do this than the technical communicator, who puts on the thinking cap of a communicator, with the end user in mind?

Kick-starting your career in technical communications

Now that you are fired up and keen to start in this profession, well, where exactly do you start?

A good education is a basis for any career. As a technical communicator you will need to demonstrate that you have the ability to research a subject in-depth and present the information from your research in an organised and clearly understandable manner. The ability to write clearly and coherently (and hopefully grammatically correct!) are fundamental skills you will need. A university degree should provide a foundation that employers will respect. In certain industries, such as engineering, aviation and pharmaceuticals, a technical or scientific background may be a prerequisite to work as a technical communicator. In other industries, such as software and finance, you may be able to gain entry, developing more customer-facing documentation, with a general Bachelors of Arts degree.

Did your university degree include courses in creative writing, business writing or English literature?

If not, then that's where you should focus your training efforts. As a technical writer, writing and presenting information are core skills. You must feel comfortable writing, be able to write coherently and fluently, and present information in a clear and organised manner.

Short courses on technical subjects or on desktop publishing and online help authoring tools used by technical writers will catch the eye of potential recruiters, who scan candidate CVs for a suitable

match on skills. Unfortunately, many employers and recruiters do not understand the requirements and skills needed for technical communications, which is still considered a niche field. Employers often do not have the time or resources to train new recruits on the basic tools of the profession, so lacking skills in suitable desktop publishing or online help authoring packages can be a barrier to employment.

Join a graduate training programme or do some voluntary work for a company. Cambridge Technical Communicators (CTC) offers a graduate training program, although numbers are strictly limited. You can find out more information at [CTC Graduate Programme](#).

Finally, join your local [Society of Technical Communications](#) (STC) or the [Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators](#) (ISTC). You will meet other technical communicators and be given access to journals and information on technical communications. STC and ISTC also have online and email forums, where new jobs are advertised on a regular basis and you can ask for advice from experienced technical communicators. These organisations also offer courses. Some employers, especially those who regularly employ technical communicators, will appreciate your professional affiliation and see it as a sign of your commitment to your career.

How much can you earn?

Okay, the million dollar question. You are unlikely to earn a million dollars. Salaries tend to be competitive with those of engineers, business analysts and teachers and slightly below that of software developers, database administrators and project managers. For example, in the UK, the salary range for permanent technical writers is between £22,000- £40,000 per annum; a senior technical writer in most parts of the UK can expect to receive up to £45k or £50K. Contract technical writer rates vary between £25-50 per hour. London permanent and contract rates are generally 10% higher.

Find out more..

Take a look at the following links, which provide more information to technical communications:

- [Society of Technical Communications \(STC\)](#)
- [Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators \(ISTC\)](#)

Finding your first technical writing job

The best place to find advertisements for permanent and contract positions technical writing is on an online recruitment board such as [jobserve.com](#) or [monster.com](#).

If searching in the UK, you should use the search term 'technical author', or 'technical authors' (as writers in the UK are known).

In general, over a 7-day period you are likely to find between 6-10 positions for technical authors, although this tends to fluctuate seasonally, with January and February being the best months to look.

We also occasionally advertise positions for technical authors on our website. See <http://www.technical-communicators.com/jobs>.

We are happy to review your CV and help you find you a suitable position.

Our competitors Cherry Leaf, 3DI and Wordsworth often advertise positions. Their postings are also available on jobserve.com.

If you want exclusive opportunities, we recommend that you join the [Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators \(ISTC\)](http://www.istc.org) or a similar organisation in your local country, which regularly posts job opportunities on their mail forums, often only available to members.

Business and Technical Writing Services

If you are seeking a technical writer for your projects or a technical writing company that can offer copywriting, technical writing and related business services, why not contact us to discuss your requirements?

To find out more about us, you can visit our website at <http://www.technical-communicators.com>

