exploring career options

Technical Writer

Alison Weaver
Founder, A Word Weaver LLC

As technology evolves at an increasingly rapid pace, the demand for people who can understand and interpret it for users also increases. Writer Alison Weaver, founder of A Word Weaver LLC, acts as a conduit, using technical writing skills and tools to connect technology to industry and industry to the public.

How did you first become interested in technical writing?
I worked as a writer and manager in corporate communications, and while I loved the writing part of my job, there wasn’t anywhere to advance but to another layer of management. Technical writers earn more than most journalists and those with bachelor’s degrees in English or communications. Adding technical writing to my skill set allowed me to expand and grow my business.

What do technical writers do?
Technical writers are essentially behind-the-scenes liaisons between computer hardware and software designers and the end user. They plan, design, organize, write, edit, and test information so users can quickly and effectively use the product. And it can be a matter of vital importance that it be done well.

For example, imagine that it was your job to write instructions for new software for a special operations unit in Afghanistan. Your client is a software developer with defense contracts, and you’re responsible for learning what the software is designed to do and writing instructions for the end user. You would work with engineers to gather the descriptions, called specs, and then determine the best way to convey the instructions: Should it include installation guides? Online help? Routine maintenance procedures? You would decide how it will be delivered to the customer, whether as a CD, printed manual, web help application, video tutorials, or a combination of these. Using technical writing tools and software programs, you would write the instructions and integrate them into the client’s software, producing an online help system, PDF instruction guide, and web page. Finally, you would test the instructions to ensure that the user can perform the tasks by following the instructions.

You mentioned testing. Who tests the final product?
Testing varies by organization and product. Testing can be formal or informal, and the product can be evaluated by people inside or outside the company.

Can you describe the types of writing that you do?
When I worked in corporate communications, I wrote about things like how to improve a business and increase productivity. I was also a freelance writer, creating annual reports and feature articles for the industries in which my clients worked, such as construction and healthcare.

Today, two-thirds of my business is still marketing communications, and the other third is technical. The ability to write in both genres is a great benefit to clients. I can use technical language to describe the features of a product to the engineer who will use it, for example, and emotional appeals commonly found in marketing for the procurement manager who will buy it. Right now, I’m

Interview by Amy Entwisle

Programs & tools technical writers use include:

- Adobe
- FrameMaker
- MapCap Flare
- RoboHelp
- Quark
- Photoshop
- MS Word
- SnagIt
- Captivate
- Dreamweaver
- CSS
- Camtasia
- html
- XM
- DITA
- Illustrator
working for a software start-up company that is creating a web-based application akin to monster.com. I’m designing and building their web-based help system to graphically display information for all users: job seekers, employers, educators, and account administrators. The design has to address the needs of those with advanced technical knowledge, as well as novice users who need more help figuring out how to get started. I’ll include a Getting Started guide for each user group so they can quickly start using the application.

What skills does one need to be a technical writer?
At minimum, you need an undergraduate degree or certificate in technical writing. My undergrad degree is in journalism, and I’ll have my master’s degree in technical communication from North Carolina State University this December. I’d say probably half of tech writers have master’s degrees. You need knowledge of software programs used to create online graphics and help manuals, as well as those used to convert analog video signals to digital. A good technical communicator is computer savvy and able to quickly learn new technologies, such as new versions of the software programs and tools we use, as well as podcasts and blogging. You need good problem-solving skills. If your blood pressure rises when you can’t figure out how to do something, this probably isn’t the field for you. Finally, you need the flexibility to be able to learn about products specific to the particular industries—or even companies—in which you work.

It seems that technical writers would be very much in demand. Is it safe to say that business is good? It is good. As long as there are new products, there will be a need for technical writers to write interpretations of engineering and design specifications and product information for the public. We will always need technical writers to link consumers to tech products and service providers.

Industry is realizing the value that technical communicators bring to a business. When you receive a toy at Christmas and try to put it together using the instructions and can’t, that’s bad technical writing. And that hurts a business’ bottom line. Really good technical writing, on the other hand, makes it easy for customers to connect to a product, and that’s desirable for everyone.

What is the biggest challenge you face? It can be a real challenge just getting access to the developers, who are busy working on the product. The second challenge is getting them to understand that if I can’t understand what they are explaining to me, then I can’t translate that to a less-informed audience.

What should kids who are interested in technical writing do now? In the program I’m in, about half the people come from a writing background, and the other half from an engineering or technical background. They have strong technical expertise, but need to build those writing skills. So look at what your strong suit is, and work on building the other half, because you need both to be successful.

What technical writers do
Technical writers prepare written interpretations of engineering and design specifications; prepare operating and maintenance manuals, catalogs, assembly instructions, and project proposals; write operating instructions for online help and documentation for computer programs; plan and edit technical materials; and oversee the preparation of illustrations, photographs, diagrams, and charts.

Where they work
You’ll find technical writers in just about any field these days, but industries employing the largest numbers of tech writers are information technology, architectural and engineering, management, scientific and technical consulting, employment services, and financial investment companies, respectively. Some technical writers work as independent contractors, providing technical writing services to businesses on an as-needed basis.

Education
Most jobs require a college degree in communications, journalism, or English, although a degree in a technical subject may be useful.

Job outlook
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), job growth was expected to increase 20 percent by 2016, with the largest increases in management, scientific, and technical consulting services, followed by computer systems design and software publishing. Expertise in the process of technical communication may be more valuable than expertise in technical writing specific to one industry.

Salary range
Salaries vary according to industry, experience, and expertise. The BLS lists the 2008 median salary for a technical writer at $61,620, with those in the 90th percentile earning $97,460. Top-paying industries for technical writers are natural gas distributors, computer equipment manufacturers, and financial investment firms.

What you can do now
If you’re a strong writer, take courses in computers or engineering. If you’re technically proficient, strengthen your writing skills. Pay attention to instructions that come with products you purchase; notice how websites configure their help pages. For links to summer programs and competitions in computer technology, engineering, writing, and more, go to www.cty.jhu.edu/imagine.

For more information
The Society for Technical Communication
www.stc.org