

Who are Technical Communicators?

This article provides the personal stories and perspectives of international technical communicators, describing how they started out in this profession, what they are currently doing and what they enjoy about their job.

What did you say you do?

Technical communications still remains a relatively less well-known and little understood career. Under the banner of a technical communicator, and depending where you are in the world, you may be called a technical writer, a technical author, an information developer, documentation specialist, editor, or go by another name.

Chances are that if you told the average person that you are a technical communicator, you will receive a blank stare or a blunt question – what's that? Even when you begin to explain, many people will still have the wrong impression, thinking that you write technical books or technical code.

Technical communicators perform a broad range of job functions, in a wide variety of industries. Their primary concern is to communicate information to users of products and services in a clear, easy to read and understandable manner. To perform their jobs, technical communicators focus on the needs of their end audience – the final readers of the documents – and use a variety of desktop publishing and graphics tools.

Technical communicators are found in all industries: telecommunications, agriculture, mining, military, aviation, transport, pharmaceuticals, medical, space etc.

Technical communicators can also specialize in various aspects of information management, such as website design, graphic design, marketing communications, knowledge management, online help, print production, training, proposal writing and technical documentation.

Why do technical communicators enter this profession?

Technical communicators enter the profession for a variety of reasons. This most common are listed below:

- Professionals employed in technical or other fields, such as engineers, helpdesk or user support personnel, are often attracted to the profession because of available opportunities. These highly skilled professionals were trained in other fields and most likely never intended to become technical communicators, but found this career suited to their temperament and needs.
- Many technical communicators come from English major or journalist backgrounds and are attracted to technical writing as an opportunity to use their writing or teaching skills, as well as the high salaries and relative flexibility the career offers.
- To meet the burgeoning demand for qualified technical communicators, graduate and post-graduate programs in technical communications have blossomed, attracting many students that are interested in a field that combines both technology and language, and provides some scope for creativity and artisanship.

What do technical communicators do?

Contrary to the impression portrayed in the media of technical communications as a boring and dull career, and technical communicators as self-obsessed introverts or laid-back procrastinators, most technical communicators are hard working and intelligent people, with good communication and organization skills, in addition to their writing competence. Most technical communicators find their work to be both exiting and varied, although some jobs do involve more mundane and routine tasks.

The tasks of technical communicators are wide ranging, depending on the industry and the company. They include writing user manuals and tutorials, producing online help files, managing or providing web site content, writing product briefs and product descriptions, white papers, presentations, case studies, proposals and other corporate documents. Technical communicators are required to understand technology and communicate it to end-users in a clear, coherent and concise manner. They are also expected to learn a wide range of word processing and graphic tools for accomplishing their tasks.

What do technical communicators enjoy about their profession?

The satisfaction that technical communicators find in their career is often based on personal needs and motivations:

- Technical communicators enjoy the flexibility their career provides. There are opportunities to work either in-house or as a contract writer, and the type of work lends itself to telecommuting or working from home.
- Many technical communicators enjoy the challenge of communicating information. They enjoy organizing and managing information, explaining concepts and describing processes. Other technical communicators enjoy the editorial function of "cleaning up" a document. Technical communicators have the advantage of being able to see immediately the product of their efforts.
- Many technical communicators find their work varied and interesting. Their jobs require continually learning about new technologies and products, as well as learning tools to document the subject matter. As the field of technical communications develops, technical communicators are required to learn new skills to keep up with the changes. The rapid rate of change means that there are always new and exiting technological developments to document.
- Some technical communicators enjoy the relatively laid back, low-stress nature of their job, since documentation is rarely a mission-critical component of a project.
- Technical communicators enjoy the contact with a wide range of employees in the company, and the relationships they are able to build with engineers and other SMEs.
- Technical communicators enjoy the opportunity to use their creative and problem solving skills, to provide artistic and attractive solutions. Often they are able to integrate graphic design and layout with the writing of the content.
- Technical communicators enjoy being able to work independently and take responsibility for documentation projects.

Some Personal Stories

The following stories from a range of novice and experienced international technical communicator in a variety of industries, provide some insight as to how technical communicators entered their profession, what it is that they do, and why they enjoy it.

Solena Le Moigne

Solena is a French technical writer who has recently completed an 18-month technical writing diploma.

Why I became a technical communicator

I was part of the very first group of students who inaugurated the European technical writing diploma. The training lasts 18 months and by the end of it, you're a young professional. I was always split between languages, science and technology. When I discovered about the diploma, I decided to join the venture.

What I do as a technical communicator

I work on a daily basis with engineers (software and hardware), test team, designers, managers. Basically I deal with anybody who needs access to the information engineers have in their heads. It's pure content creation, and I need to adapt to a wide variety of audiences.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

The job is incredibly rich and varied. I enjoy a lot working with engineers, and the idea of building one's own position to suit best the company needs is extremely stimulating. Most importantly, as a "beginner" it gives me a good idea of what docs can do at all levels of the life of a product.

Gale Stafford

Gale is a freelance technical writer based in San Francisco in the US.

Why I became a technical communicator

I was working as a technical support analyst for a software company when I first started technical writing. I noticed how many recurrent questions coming from customers - via the phone and email - could be more effectively handled with better technical documentation. So I mentioned the problem to my supervisor, and convinced her to let me start writing Quick Reference Cards. I did so, and customer response was very positive.

What I do as a technical communicator

I am currently planning a user manual revision that I'm doing for a software company in San Francisco. I am researching how to best write their on-line help documentation and revise their paper documentation. Also I am preparing for my CompTIA A+ certification exam, and marketing my services to other potential clients whenever I get the chance.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

What I enjoy most about being a technical communicator is the freedom it gives me to explore new technologies and work with smart people. In addition to writing for three different software companies, I've also written for an electromechanical

engineering company. Technical writing has also allowed me to work as an independent contractor.

Jane Carnall

Jane is a technical writer working for a UK company.

Why I became a technical communicator

When I was 14, I decided I was going to be a writer. When I was 19, I decided I was going to work as a programmer to earn money to be able to write. When I was 23, I discovered that it was possible to be a technical writer: to put together my computer geek skills with my talent for writing and earn a living that way. Then all I had to do was graduate successfully and find the first job (did that, eventually, by undercutting all my more-experienced competitors).

What I do as a technical communicator

I write manuals, I edit Javadoc, I put together information to create internal documentation, I proofread anything anyone puts under my nose.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

Getting to explain things. I'm smug like that. I love being right.

Brigitte Johnston

Brigitte is a US technical author, with 13 years experience.

Why I became a technical communicator

I began writing about 13 years ago, when I "fell into" the job. I was, at the time, an Information Systems Specialist, better known as a Help Desk person. One day, I noticed that we had in-house software programs for which there was little or no documentation. People calling the Help Desk would routinely ask me questions about how to operate the software. So, I volunteered to write the company's first official software manual, setting writing standards along the way.

What I do as a technical communicator

Most of the work has focused on writing about software applications, both in hardcopy manuals and in online help. I was involved (along with two other writers at the very large company) from the concept stage through deployment of a very large, complex health care software system, creating thousands of hardcopy pages and thousands of snippets of online help from scratch.

I primarily write and edit all sorts of documents and manuals for this company. The company conducts ergonomics training, so there are a lot of support materials we produce in-house for that. I also edit all kinds of technical reports the consultants write, along with any other writing/editing-related tasks they have for me. I have also just started working primarily out of my home, and that's working out great.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

What I like about what I do is that there is rarely an emergency. Normally, I don't work much overtime. I do my job, I do it well, and then I go home at a reasonable hour, leaving work behind for the day. I like the fact that I'm on my own a lot, and can make a lot of decisions myself. The projects keep me interested, and I interact with other folks as much or as little as I want to. I also find it particularly satisfying to be

given some text, and asked to edit it, especially when it really needs heavy-duty editing. It's like cleaning out a really messy closet, and then putting everything back in nice and neat, where everyone can find what they need. Very satisfying indeed.

J. Jones (pseudonym)

Jones works for the Manned SpaceCraft Center in Houston.

Why I became a technical communicator

I was working as an electronics technician for Texas Instruments and working on a math degree at night at the University of Houston, when I saw a Sunday ad wanting people with technical skills and 24 hours of math to be technical writers at the Manned SpaceCraft Center in Houston. I answered the ad, proved myself technically qualified, and started technical writing.

What I do as a technical communicator

I document my company's seismic data-acquisition equipment, both hardware and software.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

Telling people how things work, and how to fix and adjust them.

Shmuel Goldshtein

Shmuel is a documentation manager in Israel.

Why I became a technical communicator

It was serendipity that did it for me. There was a time in Israel, like today, that the economy was very slow. I had studied Electro-Optical engineering at Machon Lev, finishing in 1988. I worked for Indigo as a junior researcher for a year, but when that finished, I was back on the job market. I saw ads for Technical Writers and said to myself, "Hey, I can do that!".

What I do as a technical communicator

At the beginning, all of our graphics work was done by hand, and the photos by a professional photographer, whose photos we physically pasted into the books. By the time I left in 1996, most of the drawings were done on computer, and some of the photos were scanned. I then went to ECI, where I used some of my experience from LI in writing, in addition to learning online help. Later at ECI, I advanced to a management position where I was responsible for the whole set of documentation for their DCME business unit. I left ECI early in 2001, and now work at PacketLight, a telecom startup based in Kfar Saba. I have set up their documentation from scratch, and write it as well.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

It is a good job, and there is still demand for it, even though the economy is slow now.

It is easy for me to do. I do not have to be responsible for correct or incorrect design of a system. I get to play with computers. I get to do drawings. I like to organize things. It is technical, but also artistic.

Melissa Hellman

Melissa is president of Cubic Communications, in Kent, Ohio.

Why I became a technical communicator

My training is as a chemist. I spent five years taking classes and doing research in synthetic organic chemistry. I realized about four months into my second job that I absolutely hated what I was doing, and that lab work didn't float my boat in any way. In my first job at which I was paid to write, I worked for a year and a half in the Cleveland office of a large non-profit R&D organization. I learned a lot, both about working with words and working with people. I also helped them raise the level of their publications, both in content and in appearance.

What I do as a technical communicator

I took the plunge and started my own company last summer. I did it because I wanted to have more say in what I did, and because I wanted to use my scientific background without working directly in a lab doing the research. I've successfully targeted the academic community as the company's market, and we sold our first product last month: a lab manual used in an organic chemistry class, tailored to the location. We're now working on the companion for the other semester of labs, as well as a number of other projects, both paper-based and multi-media.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

Having my own company means that the time is now on my own terms: if I want to go skating at the local ice arena or ride my bike or cook something marvelous during the day, I'm free to do so. I like the fact that my projects are varied. If I need something new or different to do for a while, I can always find it. Overall, writing is a good fit for me.

Tova Sneir

Tova is a technical writer living in Israel.

How I became a technical communicator

I used to be a teacher and was very frustrated from my work. While staying in the US, I encountered an advert for a technical writing course. The description of the course attracted me and I started exploring this profession. The more I learnt about technical writing the more I liked it. The ability to write and to try and understand unfamiliar subjects and to expose myself to the technological world attracted me. I was amazed at finding out how hard it is to write instructions. The intellectual challenge excited me.

What I do as a technical communicator

I have been working as a technical writer for the last 6 years and I love it. I will soon start my MA in technical communications. Currently, I am documenting hardware and software, usually for end users and am writing online help projects.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

I love documenting a new product under development. It is a challenge understanding it and finding the way for explaining it to the end users.

The interaction between the writer and the developers is usually very fruitful and important. I can always help them come up with a better product interface wise. I also

love the actual writing. However, the most fascinating of all is writing an online help and turning written words into something very dynamic.

Walden Miller

Walden is a technical writer in the interactive TV industry. He is currently Vice President of Engineering Services at Vidiom Systems.

How I became a technical communicator

I became a technical communicator by accident. I was finishing a degree in Computer Science at UMKC in 1985 (or so) when I was offered two jobs. The second was writing manuals for Microware Systems. I hadn't even thought about a writing career, and I couldn't believe someone would pay me to write. Before engineering, my major had been writing fiction/poetry. The offered salaries were about the same, so I decided to give writing a whirl. I have never looked back.

What I do as a technical communicator

I currently write manuals, proposals, contracts, specifications, and email. I read code and occasionally write code. In the past ten years, I have helped design an interactive television authoring tool, direct interactive educational CD's (bilingual science experiments for elementary schools), written about 500 manuals, and generally had a great time.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

What I like most about my current work is helping define a new industry: interactive television. I have been writing in this field for 6 years and every day is new: new tools, new players, new companies, new technology and so on. I have to keep learning to keep up. I am also excited about the people around me, who are equally excited about defining an industry.

Lora Bovitz

How I became a technical communicator

I sort of fell into the job. I used to work as a Meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Fort Worth, Texas. We decided to return home to Minnesota and started looking for jobs. I found a listing for my current job with a weather service company in Minneapolis on their web site and the job description sounded interesting. I applied and got the job. I am thoroughly enjoying the job.

What I do as a technical communicator

Currently, I write user manuals for software used by TV and radio stations, emergency management, utilities, and other industries. I also write help files and installation instructions.

What I enjoy about being a technical communicator

I really enjoy taking software and making it understandable to the user. I see it as a puzzle to sort out what the software does and the best way to organize a manual to best present it to the user.

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