

# Technical Writing: Tales from the Field

An introduction to the field

## GIL'S TWO CENTS

*"Gil" works as a technical writer but has always wanted to work in graphic design.*

It seems that in my time in the field, I have done little to direct my own path. I graduated from SDSU with a bachelor's in Graphic Communications. When I went looking for a job, I found that the entry level graphics jobs paid \$5 an hour. This didn't impress me very much. Also at the same time, though, I received an offer from a computer software company called Tetra Tech to install their computers in the state penitentiaries. This job was to last for about 5 months and pay \$12 an hour. There was nothing to think about there. I took it. After the installations were completed, my boss asked me if I could write about what I had done and how I had done it. I had taken three writing courses in college, including one technical writing course, so I told them I felt I could do it. Apparently they liked what I produced because they moved me into the writing department as a writer/artist. My new job was to create user documents for their software products in addition to creating whatever writing and art they needed for presentations, logo design, etc. But my main focus was user manuals.

Almost 5 years later, the company hit hard times and they laid off their writing department. I sent my resume all over the place in an attempt to land an art job. In about a month, Xerox picked me up to do some art for their manuals, but most of their interest in me was because I could write. I found myself writing user's manuals again (along with creating some illustration). After a couple of years there, I landed a real art job at Rohr.

I was at Rohr for almost 5 years when I left them to go out on my own as a freelance artist. I spent a year working as a consultant for Pulse Engineering. The job was originally to be a 3 month

design job, but they found out I could write and put me on several other temporary projects.

Around this time, I became rather frustrated with several of my clients that just weren't paying me, so I went back to school to pick up some programming. When I finished my schooling, my first job was as a Quality Assurance Engineer for Compton's NewMedia. The person who hired me said that he liked me because of my writing experience, and he wanted me to write testing procedures. I had been working for them for about 5 months when Compton's was bought out and moved to the east coast. Again I was looking for a job.

Within a month, a small software company in Mission Valley called Digital Wizards picked me up. They were a defense contractor, and they created communications software for military war games testing. Again, I was creating software user documentation in addition to presentations and multimedia shows. I worked there for about 3 years when I made a move to Ismecca where I wrote user documents for robotics machines. From there I went to Pyxis Corporation where I am currently writing all sorts of documents about their products, which are medication and supply tracking machines.

To anyone wanting to get into the writing field, I would say that you've picked the right field for the San Diego area. There is an over-abundance of software companies in this area, and all of them need documentation. Some companies want you to produce a document in 3 weeks, and some want you to produce a document in 3 - 6 months. There's a broad range of products and a broad range of writing jobs. I was an artist stumbling around looking for art jobs, always finding myself in writing positions because there is a very real need for people who can write clearly. There's

a lot of work out there.

My advice to anyone just starting out is to become intimately familiar with Microsoft Word and some of the desktop publishing programs on the market (PageMaker, FrameMaker and possibly QuarkXPress). If you can write well and you know these products, you enhance your marketability, and will probably not be looking long for a job. Most writers in the field are expected to have at least a rudimentary knowledge about graphics, but this is relatively easy to pick up in a desktop publishing class at a community college. Good luck and may God be with you. Remember to smile. People will wonder what you're up to. But most of all, have fun. People like to work with people who enjoy what they're doing.

## Q & A

### **Susan -- Technical Writer**

**Q.** College major:

**A.** History and English

**Q.** Favorite subject:

**A.** History and English

**Q.** First job after graduation:

**A.** Management Analyst for a Navy Contractor

**Q.** What led you to become a technical writer?:

**A.** I wanted a career where I could write, research, and be creative. There wasn't much opportunity for a liberal arts major.

**Q.** What other careers have you had?:

**A.** Management Analyst (Research and Interviewer) and Administration Support

**Q.** What area of technical writing most interests you?:

**A.** Online help and web page design. Learning new useful ways to convey information.

**Q.** If you were starting your technical writing career now, what kinds of jobs would you apply for?:

**A.** Software companies that needed

online documentation and web page design.

**Q.** What do you like most about your job(s)?:

**A.** I get to write. I get to learn about different products and then write about them. When there is variety it is interesting.

**Q.** What do you like least about technical writing?:

**A.** When there isn't variety and I'm stuck writing or doing the same thing over and over--and I'm not learning anything new.

**Q.** What software would you recommend students study before applying for technical writing jobs?:

**A.** FrameMaker, RoboHelp, Photoshop, Visio, PaintShop Pro, PageMaker, HTML, FrontPage, JAVA scripting, and Visual Basic.

**Q.** In retrospect, what kinds of courses would have been/were most helpful to you now?:

**A.** All courses are helpful because it is good to have a well-rounded education. You need English and liberal arts courses to help you be able to think and organize your thoughts. But you also need programming courses and business courses. If you like scientific or medical writing, you need to take courses like biology, chemistry, and physics.

**Q.** Is it important to have taken some business courses?:

**A.** Yes, especially business organization and management and accounting.

**Q.** Could you describe a typical day at the office?

**A.** Researching and organizing information. Talking to subject matter experts. Working with the program I need to document. Writing topics/tasks. Sending documents out for review. Editing those documents. Attending meetings.

**Q.** Any other advice?:

**A.** Always keep learning. Technology is changing fast every day. There are many opportunities to learn new software. Try to keep up on changing trends. Go to conferences and seminars. You can't sit back and say I know all I need to know. You don't. What you know now will be obsolete in a couple of years (even sooner). Of course, good writing skills will always be needed. But constantly refresh your English skills too. Keep reading and reading in many subjects.

**Inez -- Technical Writer**

**Q.** College major:

**A.** English

**Q.** Favorite subject:

**A.** English

**Q.** First job after graduation:

**A.** Junior high school teacher of English and reading

**Q.** What led you to become a technical writer?:

**A.** I suffered from teacher burn-out and went to career counseling where tech writing was one of the career suggested. However, I didn't get into writing until the publishing company I was working for closed down. Then I used my experience at the publishing company to apply for my first tech writing job.

**Q.** What other careers have you had?:

**A.** Office manager for a mailing list company account representative and later for a technical writer, project manager for the same technical writer and for a publisher of computer-related books, and technical editor for the same publisher.

**Q.** What area of technical writing most interests you?:

**A.** Not sure if this is what you want, but I am interested in new ways to present information, e.g., on-line help, via the Internet. Also, interested in the use of graphics.

**Q.** If you were starting your technical writing career now, what kinds of jobs would you apply for?:

**A.** Jobs where I would have the chance to learn about the industry for which I would want to write, especially useful would be learning the terminology, basic concepts, available info source, etc.

**Q.** What do you like most about your job(s)?:

**A.** Organizing the information and actually writing. Also like learning new "stuff" and more about the tools I already use or will be using.

**Q.** What do you like least about technical writing?:

**A.** Having to write without a clear understanding of what is wanted, not having enough information, and having unreasonable deadlines.

**Q.** What software would you recommend students study before applying for technical writing jobs?:

**A.** Right now, MSWord, Framemaker, on-line help (RoboHelp, WinHelp, etc.), Photoshop or other graphics software.

**Q.** In retrospect, what kinds of courses

would have been/were most helpful to you now?:

**A.** Would have been helpful: courses on how to layout and organize information. Have been helpful: all my writing classes; all the classes that required gathering and organizing information in written form (term papers, etc.)

**Q.** Is it important to have taken some business courses?:

**A.** I'm not sure. Before I considered tech writing, I did have some basic courses in accounting and marketing. Also took a course titled "The Role of Computers in Business."

**Q.** Could you describe a typical day at the office?

**A.** Is there such a thing?

**Q.** Any other advice?:

**A.** Join professional organizations to (1) network, (2) learn about the field of tech writing, (3) learn about the most current software, etc. Also check the classified to see what businesses want from tech writers today (software, education, experience, etc.). Try to arrange informational interviews with tech writers (often alumni associations can help; also professional organizations).

**IMPORTANT:** Don't try to get a job out of the interview unless one is offered; you're supposed to be gathering information (and making contacts).

**Brian -- English Tutor, LANSA Programmer, Technical Writer**

**Q.** College major:

**A.** history

**Q.** Favorite subject:

**A.** linguistics

**Q.** First job after graduation:

**A.** teaching (history & English)

**Q.** What led you to become a technical writer?:

**A.** a decision from management at my company to merge my English and teaching experience with my computer programming knowledge

**Q.** What other careers have you had?:

**A.** high school teacher, elementary school teacher, ESL teacher, software engineer

**Q.** What area of technical writing most interests you?:

**A.** designing formats and standards; technical manual writing

**Q.** If you were starting your technical writing career now, what kinds of jobs would you apply for?:

**A.** writing for areas in which I have the have knowledge/interest: linguistics and computers

**Q.** What do you like most about your job(s)?:

**A.** I love teaching, and technical writing requires good teaching skills.

**Q.** What do you like least about technical writing?:

**A.** Sometimes you have to work within certain boundaries or standards that you may not agree with.

**Q.** What software would you recommend students study before applying for technical writing jobs?:

**A.** word processing (like Word), any software that can be merged with it (eg. Excel), graphics software (like Photoshop), and web page production software (like Front Page)

**Q.** In retrospect, what kinds of courses would have been/were most helpful to you now?:

**A.** technical writing, web page design, banking

**Q.** Is it important to have taken some business courses?:

**A.** Definitely, but in my case, banking is the area in which I work.

**Q.** Could you describe a typical day at the office?

**A.** There are generally two kinds of projects: those that our documentation office generates, and maintenance jobs that are done on a daily basis in response to requests. The latter requires keeping on top of the workflow within the company, so I begin my day checking inter-office communication to see if any new requests have been submitted. Large projects generated within our department often require discussions with product developers, Q/A people, and managers. When the inevitable disagreements occur, compromises have to be proposed. The rest of the day may be monotonous copying-and-pasting with a word processor, but often it gets more creative and interesting when we take processes and procedures and compose something to explain them. At times, the documentation team may design new formats or standards for written or electronic material. This is also creative.

**Q.** Any other advice?:

**A.** When looking for a job, put a high priority on working for a company in a field that interests you, even if it that means accepting a little lower pay. You

will enjoy your job more, and your work will be of higher quality.

