

Lecture Notes:
Careers In Technical Communication
Day One PM

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"And the Lord spake, saying, "First shalt thou take out the Holy Pin, then shalt thou count to three, no more, no less. Three shalt be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shalt be three.

"Four shalt thou not count, neither count thou two, excepting that thou then proceed to three. Five is right out.

"Once the number three, being the third number, be reached, then lobbest thou thy Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch towards thy foe, who being naughty in My sight, shall snuff it."

- Monty Python And The Holy Grail

What's Different About Technical Writing?

Technical writing is not narrative in nature. Although sections may be read through in a linear fashion, from start to finish, technical writing is really designed to be leafed through.

This provides users with exactly the information they need to answer the question at hand, and the means to find out more when they have the time.

Types of Technical Information

- Feature descriptions -- a physical description of the product's user interface and features
- Strategic information -- about when to perform certain tasks, or how to set things up
- Reference information -- provides detailed background on each function, and describes how all functions interrelate
- "Why to" (contextual) information
- Reference information -- deep background on the subject at hand, and related subjects
- "How to" information -- procedures for performing tasks

Technical Writing is Modular

A module is a short answer to a single question, such as "What kind of refrigerator is that?" or "How do I fill this out?"

Modules are easy to write, because they have very clear parameters; easy to maintain, because they're short.

You can link or cross-reference modules to create connections for your users, or just index them very well, so users can make connections for themselves.

Technical Writing Is Economical

Technical writing is not about showing the user how clever you are; it's about maximizing the user's access to information.

Do not use three words when one will do. Do not use a five-syllable word when a two-syllable word will do.

Use active voice ("there is a problem") rather than passive voice ("a problem was found") whenever possible.

Technical Writing Is Tested

Technical writing is based on hard, verifiable facts.

Screen shots, procedure steps, error messages, and program behavior must synch exactly with the product being described.

This is how Quality Assurance and Technical Support groups review technical documentation -- and why these groups will provide some of your most valuable feedback.

Technical Writing Is *Styled*

The primary goals of style, in any kind of writing, are:

- Beauty -- enticing the reader to review the substance within
- Utility -- organizing and designing the material in a form that enhances usability

What is Style For?

In creating any kind of knowledge system, there is a third goal:
Consistency

... and for companies whose corporate “personality must be reflected in their print or online goods, there is a fourth: Identity

This is especially true in technical writing, where all design elements must serve the user’s access to information.

Elements of Style: Layout

- Titles
- Headings
- Graphics
- Footnotes
- Headers/footers
- Figures/Tables
- Margins

- Color
- Fonts
- Page numbering
- Illustration

Elements of Style: Writing

- Audience
- Formality
- Notes/cautions/warnings
- Glossary entries
- Heading styles
- Acronyms/jargon
- Indexing
- Cross-references
- Grammar/voice

Elements of Style: Planning

- Standard manual titles and organizations
- Templates
- Localization issues
- Inheritance issues

Unique to Electronic Doc

- Window size, position, color, and options
- Navigational design
 - buttons
 - search options
 - K links/A links
 - colors
- Navigational philosophy

Elements Beyond Your Control

- Word processing program
- Binding
- Paper stock
- Color, black and white, or ... ?

These decisions are usually made by your management, Marketing, or Purchasing.

Career Paths For Technical Communicators

- “Classic” paths into technical communications
- Production specialist
- Editor
- “Technical Writer” tree
- “Web Designer” tree
- Training and Technical Education
- Project/product Management

To Manage Or Not To Manage

The model of advancement in school is to “graduate” from grade to grade. Yet sometimes “advancing” into management moves you out of a job you enjoy, and do well, into a world that requires a very different skill set.

Managers have both power...

- To hire and fire (and do all the paperwork that comes with it)
- To review performance (and do all the paperwork that comes with it)
- To direct the architecture, style, and direction of the entire documentation suite
- To mentor and mold and compel

and responsibility ...

- To set deadlines and ensure the work gets done properly, and under budget

- To react to other people's deadlines, and juggle their staff to meet the challenge
- To help their staff develop
- To hire and fire (and do all the paperwork that comes with it)

Contract or Staff?

Most technical communicators work as regular staff employees. Some of them are paid hourly, but the vast majority are paid an annual salary. About 20% of technical communicators work as contractors -- through job shops, employment agencies, or their own independent operations.

The differences are way more than financial.

Staff employment

- Pay status: W2; taxes and social security withheld
- Advantages
 - There are usually more staff jobs out there
 - Slightly more stable
 - They pay for benefits (although job shops and agencies can do this, too)
 - You're often paid to learn new skills
- Disadvantages
 - The corporate environment
 - Not *that* much more stable
 - Easy to get stuck in one technology, using tried-and-true tools
 - Flip side of more hand-holding may be getting pigeonholed

Contract employment

- Pay status: 1099; you do your own withholding
- Advantages
 - You have a customer, rather than a boss
 - Less intrusion from corporate politics
 - Higher pay
 - You can still get benefits (if you work through a job shop or an agency)
 - Broad exposure to tools and technologies
- Disadvantages
 - There may be periods of unemployment
 - More isolated from staff employees
 - Lots of time spent in "audition" mode
 - Less time available to learn those new tools and technologies -- you have to hit the ground running!

Most people who become contractors (or even highly-paid consultants) do it for the schedule flexibility.

People tend to start out as staff, then become contractors...

- When they get married
- When their parenting responsibilities change
- Once they've made their fortune working at a start-up, and no longer care about periods of unemployment

A Word About Temp Agencies

Temporary employment agencies are “payroll shops” who will job you out to employers as a non-permanent employee. You're still W2'd, but you have no assurance of continuing employment.

As a temp, you are an employee of the agency. The client signs off on your hours, but pays the agency, and not you. There's generally a mark-up of between 15 and 33 percent.

Advantages of Temping

- It's a good way to break in to the industry
- You can register with more than one agency at a time
- Try Before You Buy

Disadvantages of Temping

- All the responsibility of a staff employee, but none of the perks
- No write-offs

The Lure Of The Start-up

It's the classic Silicon Valley carrot:

- Get into a start-up, really early on
- Get tons of shares
- Write your own job description
- Staff your own department, from scratch
- Retire to Tahiti after the IPO

And sometimes it actually happens that way.

But not often enough.

Start-ups are little “garage shop” ventures that are occasionally financed entirely by their founders, but more often given a boost (or completely underwritten) by Venture Capitalists.

Venture Capital companies put up the money to launch new companies. Ideally, they also contribute their expertise as successful businesspeople with excellent track records, to making the fledgling company a success.

Successful venture-funded start-ups include:

- Yahoo
- Amazon.com
- Netscape
- Excite

Thing is, VC’s are not Robin Hood. They’re in this to make a profit. They can pull the plug at any time.

Down Side

- Huge risk (only 20% succeed)
- Poor management
 - Most startups are run by people who are holding lofty titles for the first time in their career
 - Nobody has time to teach you anything
 - No HR means that if you think you’re being treated unfairly, you’re on your own
- Long hours
 - Success is hard-won, and may come at the expense of your health and your personal relationships. If you bail out early, your options can be repurchased at market value.
- Frustration
 - Start-ups make more mistakes than larger, less risky companies
- The Peter Principle

Up Side

- Even if the start-up fails
 - You learn how to do everything
 - You create your own job; nobody gets in your way
- And if the start-up succeeds
 - You can make a boatload of money!
 - The company tries to give you incentive to stick around (“Golden Handcuffs”).

Is it worth the risk?

- Look at the business plan with the eye of an investor.
How many shares make up the company? How much do the venture firms have, as compared to the founders? (This tells you who really owns it.)
- Look at the product concept.
Does the plan make sense, do you think they can execute on it, and is the market for the product or services real?
- Look at the corporate culture.
Each person can make or break the company. One bad executive can cause a dozen good people to leave. One bad employee can ruin a good product.
- **Find out if they're willing to promote from within.**
Make sure the managers aren't using this "ground floor opportunity" to bring in their buddies to fill key slots.

And, finally...

If the company goes belly-up, your stock options become worthless. Make sure they're paying you what your job is really worth.

Bibliography For This Segment

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 - National Writers' Union (especially Bruce Hartford)
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 - Rich Julius
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(<http://www.andreas.com/vcjobs.htm>)
- ... and many other colleagues whom I did not quote directly.