Career Opportunities in Technical Writing: A Research Report

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Table of Contents

1.0 Abstract iii
   1.1 Problem iii
   1.2 Solution iii

2.0 Introduction 1
   2.1 Purpose 1
   2.2 Problem 1
      2.2.1 Teaching 1
      2.2.2 Journalism 2
      2.2.3 Creative Writing 2

3.0 Discussion 3
   3.1 Job Definition 3
   3.2 Required Skills 4
   3.3 Required Education 4
   3.4 Salary Range 5
   3.5 Job Opportunities 6

4.0 Conclusion/Recommendation 8

5.0 Works Cited 9

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Median Salary by One-Digit Zip Codes 6

Table 1: Technical Writers Salaries 5
Table 2: Salaries by Zip Code 6
1.0 Abstract

1.1 Problem:

Choosing a career might be one of the most important decisions I make. After all, I will spend at least eight hours a day, five days a week at my job. Furthermore, given today's economy, I should plan on working until I retire at approximately age 65. As a typical undergraduate (age 22) entering the job market, I could expect to work for over 40 years. A wise prospective employee, therefore, should select a job that promises long-term fulfillment. Is technical writing a good career for me to pursue?

1.2 Solution:

To determine whether technical writing is the best career option, I researched the following questions:

- What does the job entail?
- What are the job's required skills?
- How much and what type of education should a technical writer have?
- What salary should a technical writer expect to receive?
- Are there opportunities for employment?
2.0 Introduction

2.1 Purpose:

The purpose of this research report is to determine whether or not technical writing is a good career option.

2.2 Problem:

After performing a career skills assessment, I found that I have the following aptitudes and needs:

Aptitudes

- Verbal, with an ability to write and speak well.
- Comfortable around technology, especially computer hardware and software applications.
- People oriented.
- Flexible, and I work well under stress.
- Analytical and focused on a strict adherence to order.

Needs

- Earn an income sufficient enough to help me pay back my college loans and high enough to allow me to enjoy creature comforts.
- Work in an environment allowing for growth opportunities.
- Work for a corporation that provides benefits such as stock options.
- Work with creative people.

My career options include teaching, journalism, creative writing, and technical writing. However, the first three choices are problematic, for the following reasons:

2.2.1 Teaching

Both of my parents are teachers. My mother teaches 3rd grade, and my father teaches high school English. My parents have told me for years that teaching does not pay well. Actually, this is not totally correct. The Occupational Outlook Handbook for 2002 says that According to the American Federation of Teachers, beginning teachers with a bachelor's degree earned an average of $27,989 in the 1999-2000 school year (7). This is a decent starting salary, unless you compare it to engineering which pays about twice that much. However, the downside of teaching is that the majority of teachers only earn about $40,000 (Occupational Outlook 7). Thus, salaries do not increase rapidly. This salary level would not allow me to pay off my educational debts, nor could I afford the trips, home, car, or creature comforts I would like. In addition, schools do not provide
stock options, another concern of mine. An education degree also demands a five-year program in most states. I would rather graduate in four years.

Finally, I don’t believe I am patient enough to work with children or their parents. When I interviewed my mother about her job, asking her what stresses she experienced, she said the following:

Heather, I experience two significant challenges. First, kids will be kids. They squirm, get antsy, need to go to the bathroom, pick on each other, have upset stomachs, . . . you know. Kid stuff. I love them, but it’s tough teaching a moving target, and the kids are little atoms, whirling in all directions. Believe me, Heather, you’ve got to be patient. Hon, I don’t know if you are patient enough. Second, and even more challenging, is dealing with parents. Every mom and dad believes that their little Johnnies and Julies are geniuses. And we know that’s not true. The toughest challenge is patiently explaining that a parent’s kid is not necessarily a perfect angel. I’ve gotten good at it, but it has taken me lots of practice. (Whitney)

2.2.2 Journalism
Journalism would allow me to work with adults and emerging technologies. Furthermore, most newspapers offer benefits like stock options. However, journalism, like teaching, is not a high paying job at the entry level. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook for 2002, a journalist’s starting salary is around $20,000 (5). This is even less than a teaching salary. Even worse, Median annual earnings were $26,470 in the newspaper industry (5). That means that salaries do not increase rapidly. In addition, though I have writing skills, I do not necessarily want to write about human-interest stories, sports, politics, or entertainment.

2.2.3 Creative Writing
This field of employment is the least interesting to me. Creative writers can become millionaires, but this depends on too many variables. I would not be able to work for a corporation offering benefits. I also would have to work alone rather than with a team of coworkers. Most importantly, I am not creative. Instead, my skills are more analytical.
Technical writing appeals to me more than the other job options I am statistically suited for. To get a better understanding of this career field, I researched the following:

- Job Definition
- Required Skills
- Required Education
- Work Environment
- Salary Range
- Opportunity for Advancement

### 3.1 Job Definition

What does a technical writer do? According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH), technical writers put scientific and technical information into easily understandable language. They prepare scientific and technical reports, operating and maintenance manuals, catalogs, parts lists, assembly instructions, sales promotion materials, and project proposals. They also plan and edit technical reports and oversee preparation of illustrations, photographs, diagrams, and charts (2).

In addition, the OOH states that these writers might prepare material directly for the Internet. For example, . . . they may write the text of Web sites. These writers should be knowledgeable about graphic design, page layout and desktop publishing software. Additionally, they should be familiar with interactive technologies of the Web so they can blend text, graphics, and sound together (2).

Saul Carliner, a former president of the Society for Technical Communication, adds to this definition, stating that although no single technical definition of the term technical communication exists, . . . technical communicators are people who work in the broader field of business communication. Our specialty is designing and developing communication products that transfer information from the experts who know it to others who need it. According to surveys of STC members, the type of information most commonly exchanged tells people how to use software and similar high technology products. This information might be printed as user guides, or available online as help and, increasingly, through home pages (1).

After reading the above definitions, I was happy to see that technical writing deals so heavily with technology, one of my interests. Another goal of mine, however, is to work with people collaboratively. Luckily, Carliner says that this too is a key feature of a technical writer’s job. There’s a lot of collaboration. You’re interviewing people. You’re coordinating. Twenty to 30 percent of your time is writing, but contrary to
what many people assume, work as a technical writer involves much more than sitting alone at your PC. The job requires plenty of contact with technical professionals from programmers to project managers to write and design documentation for software. Solitary? Not quite. Collaborative? Most definitely (Hoffman 1).

3.2 Required Skills

The next concern is the required skills for work as a technical writer. Obviously, as noted, an effective technical writer must work well with others, communicate effectively, and have technology skills. It seems that technology (specifically computer ability) is key to success. More than most professionals, technical communicators need continual learning to keep up with both new technology and changes in the workplace environment (Janicko 7).

Though a working knowledge of specific software tools is usually the minimum requirement for most jobs (Janicko 7), more than that is needed. Emerging technologies are a large hurdle for all technical writers. Carey Straetz says that a technical writer should expect to work with a product written in FrameMaker, distributed in PDF, and imported to WebWorks for an HTML version, with an SGML version on the drawing board (11).

I went online to search for a technical writing job. When I did so, I found the following requirements listed: Visual Basic, Java, HTML, C++, SQL Server, Access (Applied Communication Group). Another job site listed these employment requirements:

- Experience writing online help and end-user documentation
- Excellent communication and writing ability
- Experience with RoboHELP or other WinHelp authoring tool preferred
- Familiarity with HTML or HTML-based help a plus
- Proficiency in Microsoft Word
- Self-starter; ability to work with minimal supervision

Again, I was very happy to learn what this job entails. Work as a technical writer should fulfill my interest in technology and computer skills.

3.3 Required Education

According to the Occupational Outlook Handout, a college degree generally is required for a position as a writer or editor (4). However, unlike other areas of technology, technical communication . . . does not have a widely recognized certification (Hoffman 2). This is because professional technical writers tend to come
from many different backgrounds, including English, journalism, engineering, and/or computer sciences (Hoffman 2). The OOH confirms this, stating, Some [technical writers] transfer from jobs as technicians, scientists, or engineers. Others begin as research assistants, or trainees in a technical information department, develop technical communication skills, and then assume writing duties (4).

However, more and more technical writers are receiving specialized formal education in technical writing. Dr. Tom Warren, former director of the technical writing program at Oklahoma State University, says that in the 1950s, only two universities offered technical communication programs. Now, over 300 colleges and universities offer technical writing programs either at the bachelors, masters, or doctorate levels (Warren, Southwest Missouri State University STC Student Conference Presentation, April 13, 2002).

It seems that the best route to success in technical writing might be a formal education in this field.

3.4 Salary Range

As I have noted previously, a major factor in my career search is financial remuneration. Does work as a technical writer pay well? Amazingly, the mean salary for technical writers is $55,360, as of 2001 (2001 Technical Communicator Salary Survey 4). That’s double the mean salary for journalists. Furthermore, the starting salary for technical writers is higher than both the starting salaries for teachers and journalists, as noted in Table 1 below (2001 Technical Communicator Salary Survey 4):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Technical Writers Salaries</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level, Non-supervisory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-level, Supervisory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior-level, Non-supervisory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior-level, Supervisory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the starting salary for a technical writer is approximately $10,000 higher than a new teacher and $16,000 higher than a starting journalist. In addition, the top end of the scale is higher for a technical writer than for both teachers and journalists.

Of equal importance to me is salary by region. The Society for Technical Communication graphically depicts salaries by geographic locale, as seen in Figure 1 and Table 2 below:
My family is from region 6, where I hope to live one day. That Zip Code area pays an average salary of $51,000, a good wage for life in the Midwest.

One last fact makes technical writing an appealing job for me. As a woman, I want to be paid equal to any man. Statistically, this does not happen in the work place, where women make only 76% of a man’s salary. However, according to the Society for Technical Communication Salary Survey, men make on average $56,310 while women make on average $54,860 (4). That means that a woman technical writer’s salary is 96% of a man’s. Though equity has not yet been achieved, technical writing provides a more equitable salary for men and women than other professions do.

3.5 Job Opportunities

My research has provided me with many good features about technical writing. None of these are important, however, unless technical writing offers numerous job opportunities.
Luckily, the profession seems to be strong. Carey Straetz refers to its explosive growth (11). Jane Hammack says that with the advent of today's software and high-tech applications, technical writing has become an increasingly hot career field (17). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics says that the demand for technical communicators should increase in direct proportion to the increase in new technologies. That said, the future is bright for this profession (Hoffman 3). The OOH says that employment should increase faster than average, which translates as an increase of 20-35% (5).

An Associated Press release of March 1999 ranked technical writing as the 14th best job, based on salary, minimal stress, job outlook, job security, and physical demands (Where does your job rank? 1). The comment that most impressed me, though, was one I found in an online employment review. Kara Kitts writes that technical writing is a vital link to the vast, ever-changing and frequently confusing world of technology. Without it, people would be inventing products that the mass public would have no clue how to use. For that reason and more, technical communication is carving a niche for itself as a high-demand career (1). The key words for me are vital, ever-changing, and high-demand. I want a job that is important to the future, one that presents changing challenges, and, of course, a job that is in high demand.
Often when I tell people that I am thinking about becoming a technical writer, they say what s that? Like them, I was uncertain about what this job required. Now, however, after having researched the career, I have a better understanding of this job. My research suggests the following:

• The job is challenging.
• Emerging technologies are key to this profession.
• Working with a team of collaborators is important.
• Technical writing is vital to people s understanding of science and technology.
• Salaries are higher than wages in other writing professions.
• Women s salaries are more equitable to men s wages.
• Job opportunities are plentiful.

Based on these findings, I have concluded that technical writing is a great field to enter.
5.0 Works Cited


**Annotation:** This research report uses multiple sources and employs a long report format to convey information. Note the use of headings and subheadings to aid in audience ease of access.