

You Want to Be a Technical What?

Jane A. Hammack

Lone Star Chapter

(Originally published in the July/August 1999 issue of Intercom. Small changes have been made to this version.)

When I told my father I was thinking about quitting public school teaching to become a technical writer, his response was, “You want to be a technical what?” I guess my father had never heard of technical writing and was more familiar with the traditional fields such as engineering and science.

But with the advent of today’s software and high-tech applications, technical writing has become an increasingly hot career field and more people have heard of it. Because I made a career transition into technical writing, others often ask me how they can do the same.

What do you say when someone asks you, “How do I become a technical writer?” My approach is outlined below--you might find it useful.

Background

Tell your story to the technical writing candidate: your previous career(s) and how your past work experience helps you in the technical writing field. Because I worked as a high school chemistry teacher for several years, I tell people how writing a curriculum, lab manuals, and research guidelines for science fair projects was valuable experience for technical writing.

Most technical writers have a degree in a field other than technical writing. In his February 1999, Intercom article, “Tools or Talent? Hiring a Technical Writer,” Jack Molisani states, “It is generally accepted that a technical writer should have some higher education, but there are two schools of thought on which is better: a degree in English or a degree or certificate in a technical subject. Given the choice of two writers who communicate well (which you’ve established by looking at samples of their writing, right?); I’d choose the writer with the technical background. It’s pretty safe to assume that if a candidate has learned one technical subject, he or she can learn another.”

Required Skills

If a candidate has a technical background without much writing experience, provide information about software training classes and technical writing courses that will help him or her develop skills necessary for changing careers. Universities and junior colleges offer courses in technical writing, many as requirements for technical degrees.

Receiving a degree in technical communication was almost unheard of until 20 years ago. More universities now offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in technical communication. For a list of schools offering coursework or degrees in technical communication, please visit the STC office Web site at <http://www.stc.org/>.

Portfolios

Show your portfolio to a candidate and explain why you selected the writing samples you did. Explain the importance of having a portfolio. In the June 1998 Intercom article “Focus on Your Portfolio,” Eric W. Haddock states, “A good portfolio is so valuable that a technical communicator would be foolish not to create one. I wouldn’t hire anyone who didn’t have a portfolio. In fact, a degree is worth no more than the paper it’s printed on without some kind of evidence that an applicant knows how to apply skills and see a product through the production process... A good portfolio is better than a great resume. A superior portfolio often means you’ll be hired. Put a lot of effort into it--a lot of effort.”

Getting Started

Moving into a new field is challenging, especially when the time comes to find employment. Let the candidate know how you found your first technical writing job. You might have “fallen into it” from a position you already had, or you might have searched for it. Suggest that the candidate read “What Colour Is Your Parachute?” by Richard Nelson Bolles.” The book is a guide for determining analytical skills and evaluating personal goals and future objectives. It also includes information about writing resumes and follow-up letters.

“What Colour Is Your Parachute?” suggests locating companies that have the career you want to pursue for yourself. The book also suggests requesting informal interviews, stressing that you are only searching for information. This works--in my case, I let “my fingers do the walking” and found information in the Yellow Pages. I looked up technical writing, technical documentation, documentation, or any category that applied to technical writing and called every company listed, explaining that I was a high school chemistry teacher who wanted to enter the field of technical writing. I asked questions only about how to enter the field, how to get started as a technical writer, and what type of training would be beneficial for moving into this field.

When you are not asking for a job, it is astonishing how many people are willing to provide guidance. I was inundated with information about how others moved from different careers into technical writing. Some people even shared their life stories and told me that a teaching background is well suited to technical writing. The interviewees provided information about courses offered at colleges. Most important, they directed me to STC.

Provide candidates information about STC and give them a contact for their local chapter. You might invite a candidate to an STC meeting as a guest and introduce him or her to other

technical writers. When I contacted STC, I explained my background and desire to become a technical writer. Dale Erickson from the Lone Star chapter immediately responded by sending the most recent job bank listing. He gave me information about upcoming meetings and special interest groups for making contacts.

Final Thoughts

I contacted a technical writer in my quest for information. She asked me to come in for an informal interview. Though no job was available, I dressed up in interview attire and went to the company with writing samples--lesson plans included. The writer wanted to help me enter this field and showed me what she did as a technical writer. I showed her my writing samples, and she advised me to use this information as a portfolio and to take it to all job interviews. As the informal interview concluded, she gave me the name of another writer who might also provide some helpful information. I contacted that writer by phone and received another name--the name of my future boss! I finally had my foot in the door as an entry-level technical writer.

I know each of us has unique stories and backgrounds. We all have found our own way to “get our foot in the door” in technical writing. We can help others break into this exciting field by keeping these three words in mind--encourage, encourage, encourage!

About the Author

Jane A. Hammack is a technical writer for MetaSolv Software, Inc., in Plano, Texas. She writes online help for a telecommunication provisioning software. She taught high school chemistry for three and a half years and has “officially” been a technical writer for more than four years. You can reach her at jahammack@yahoo.com.