

Technical Communications

A Guide to Entering the Field

By Jonathan Anscher



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Introduction

So, you've decided to be a Technical Writer? You probably have a lot of questions. I'm going to address many of questions with five main topics: range of work, salary and job market, freelance and contract work, finding the right job, and continued education. But, first, let me tell you a little about this field.

Technical communications is a category of jobs that involves taking very technical information and communicating it through a variety of media to a diverse audience.¹ Technical communicators are more often referred to as technical writers, though very few technical writers are limited only to writing in their jobs. Technical communication is a better and more comprehensive term.

It is rapidly growing and many companies are in need of good writers. The US News and World Report listed "technical writer" as one of the fifty best careers of 2011. In their recommendation, they referenced the range of work, the potential job market, and the creative aspects of these jobs.²

Range of Work

Technical communications is a vast field with many different opportunities. Almost every company is in need of writers and editors to help craft the communications and resources needed to work in a global community. There are four areas of variety in the technical communications field: subject matter, medium, location, and job type.

The first way to vary your work as a technical communicator is through subject matter. The potential subject matter is limitless. If there is an area of expertise people work in, there will be a need for someone to write and edit materials and communications for that area.

Engineering, science, healthcare, technology, education, law, politics, entertainment, and hospitality are all potential fields that would need technical communicators.³ And that is just scratching the surface.

Mediums in Technical Communications

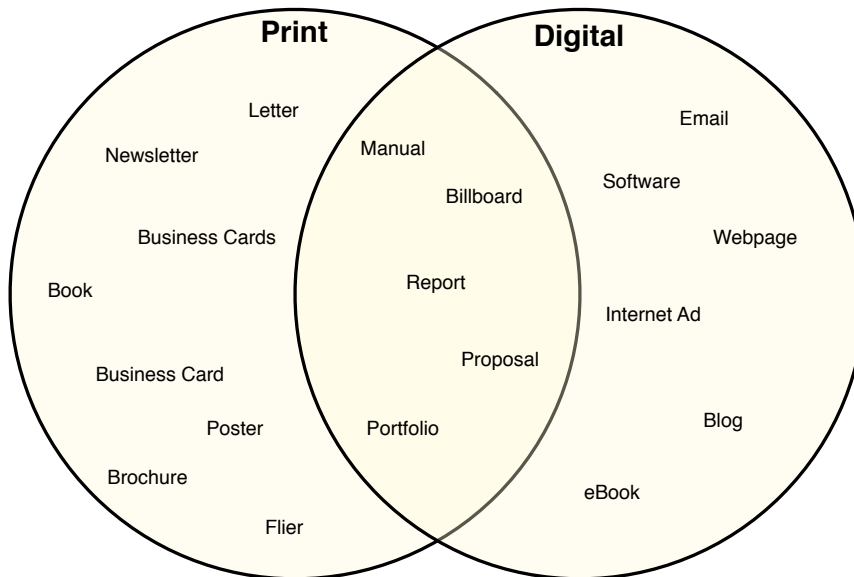


Figure 1 - Mediums of Technical Communication

Venn Diagram of some of the mediums technical communicators may work with.

The second way to vary your work as a technical communicator is through media. Most writers work in many mediums, but it is not uncommon for writers to specialize. Mediums can be broken into two general categories: digital and print—though, there is overlap between these two. Figure 1 outlines some of the mediums that technical communicators work with.

The third way to vary your work as a technical communicator is through work location. Technology has reached a point where

high levels of collaborative work can happen anywhere. Many companies will offer some level of telecommuting—working from a remote location. Also, choosing a self-employment path (see the section on freelance and contract work), you can begin to create your own work environment.

The last way to vary your work as a technical communicator is through job type. Job type will determine the particular role you have with the company. The biggest separator between technical communicators is whether you are on the editing or the writing side. Although you will dip into both sides of that equation, you will likely find yourself more effective with one or the other of those roles.⁴ Beyond that, there are many different roles you may fill as a technical communicator. Figure 2 outlines some of the different job roles you might find in the technical communications field.

Job	Description of Role
Technical Editors	Revise, edit, and proofread the work of other writers. ⁵
Technical Communicators	Create documents for technical or specialized products. ⁶
Indexers	Systematically arrange information in a searchable manner. ⁷
Information Architects	Work with models and systems of information. ⁸
Instructional Designers	Maximize the efficiency of curriculum delivery.
Technical Illustrators	Use graphics to relay technical information. ⁹
Globalization & Localization Specialists	Adapt writing for delivery in multiple languages and cultures. ¹⁰
Usability & Human Factors Professionals	Design materials that maximize usability and human interaction with materials. ¹¹
Visual or Graphic Designers	Use typography, visual arts and page layout to deliver information more efficiently. ¹²
Web Designers & Developers	Specialize in the develop of webpages and web applications.
Teachers & Researchers of Technical Communication	Study and teach the theory and principles of Technical communication.
Trainers and E-Learning Developers	Develop in-house and internet-based training for organizations.

Figure 2 - Jobs in Technical Communications

This is a list of some of the jobs that exist under the umbrella of Technical Communicator.

Salary and Job Market

When thinking about salary, remember to consider cost of living. Your expenses will obviously be higher in popular metropolitan areas (Seattle, Vancouver, San Francisco). Of course, your job opportunities will be more abundant in metropolitan areas as well.

Job Market and Salary Ranges in Washington

Washington is among the top states in the country as far as employing and paying technical communicators. Washington has the third highest mean annual pay for technical communicators at \$78,850. It is also the fifth highest concentration of technical communicators at 59 technical writers per 100,000 employees.¹³

Figures 3 and 4 below give a picture of Washington compared to other states in both salary and concentration of jobs. As you can see, technical communicators are paid more and comprise a larger portion of the working force in Washington.

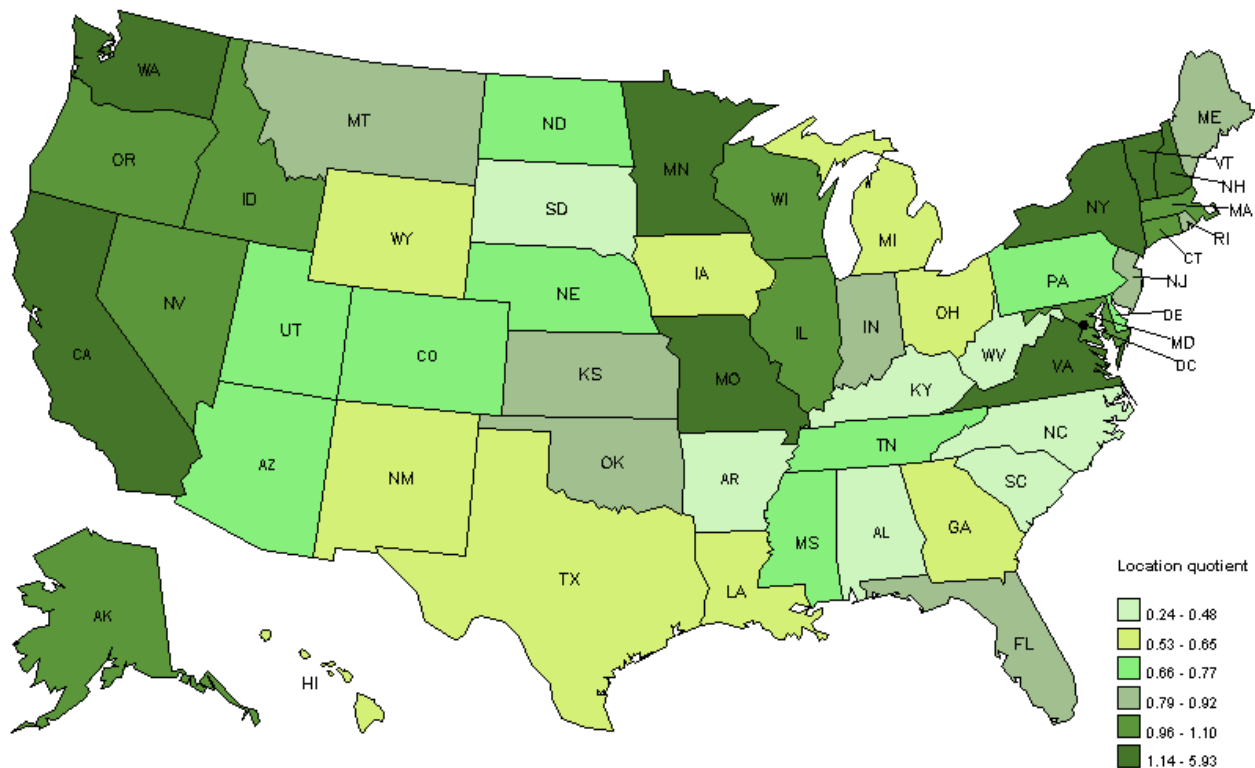


Figure 3 - Technical Communication Job Proportions by State

This measures the quotient of technical communicators per state. Darker greens indicate a larger percentage of technical communicators in the work force. This graphic was taken in whole from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁴

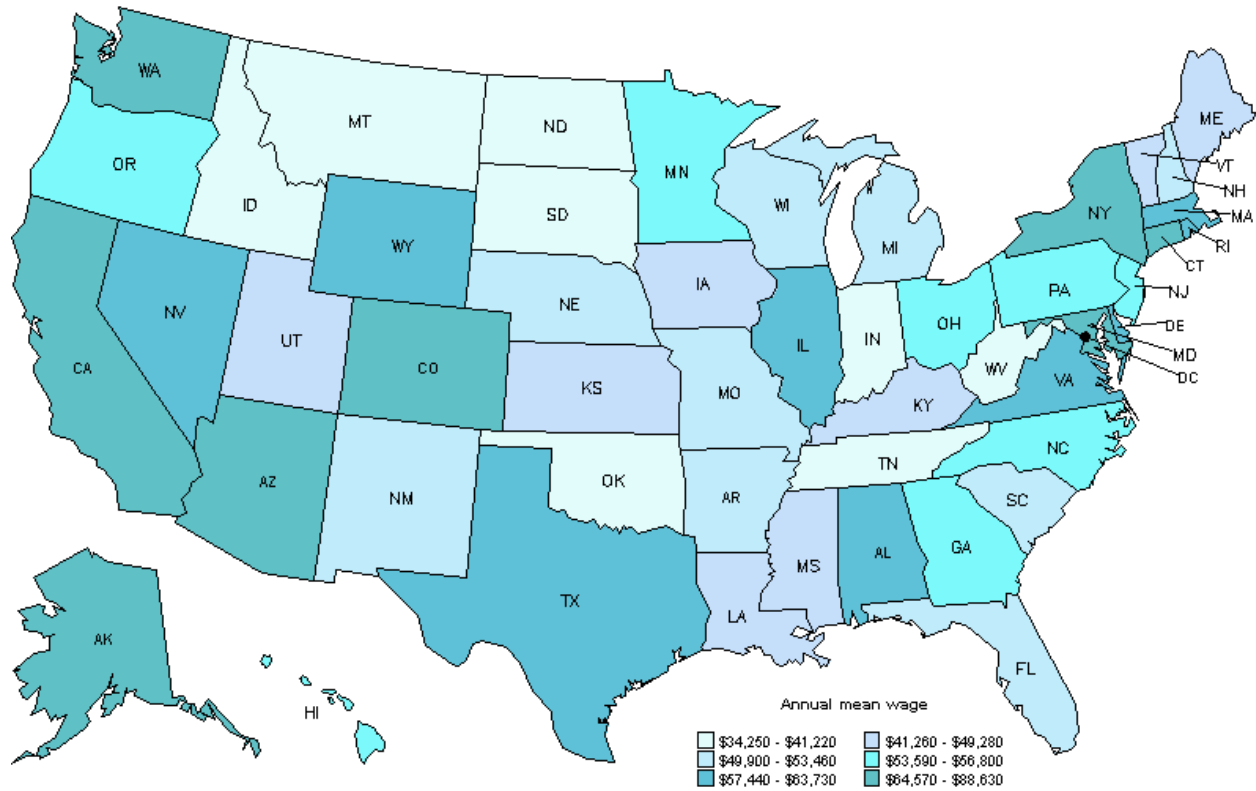


Figure 4 - Technical Communication Salaries by State
 This measures the average annual salary of technical communicators per state. Darker blues indicate larger annual income. This graphic was taken in whole from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁵

This information, as well as the figured below, come from the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics. This organization is “responsible for measuring labor market activity, working conditions, and price changes in the economy.”¹⁶

Job Market and Salary Ranges in British Columbia

Relocating can be a big decision. It is worth getting to know the job market of wherever you are planning to move. Especially when moving to another country, finding a job first can help make your transition easier. Companies sometimes offer relocation packages and can help with obtaining a visa.

A great resource for helping to make a move to Canada is CanadaVisa.com. This site is dedicated to helping people trying to make that very move. Figure 5 shows salary ranges for both entry level and senior level technical communicators in Canada. These amounts are comparable if slightly less than what can be found in the United States.

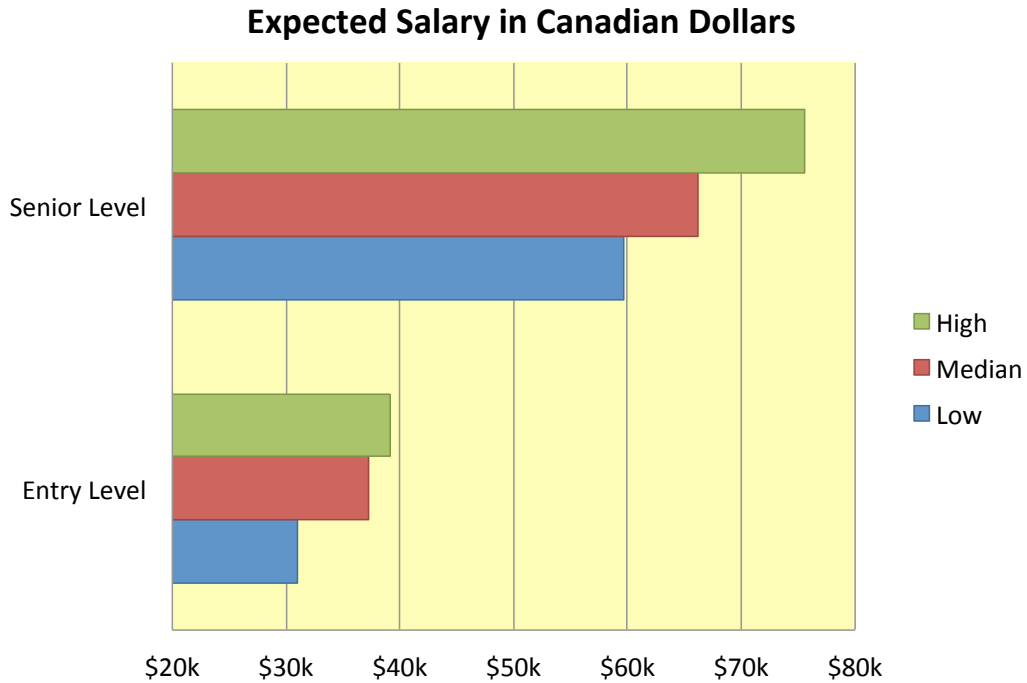


Figure 5 - Technical Communication Salaries in Canada

Annual salary data for technical communicators in Canada. Data compiled from CanadaVisa.com.¹⁷

As far as the job market goes, it seems to be as lucrative if not more so than the United States. A quick search of CanadaVisa.com uncovered 617 jobs related to technical writing and, as you explore the results, you will find the vast majority of them are directly related to technical writing.¹⁸

Looking to relocate is always a big decision. Remember that you can also look for jobs that do not require you to live in any particular location (whether it be freelance or a telecommuting situation).

Salary by Job Type

Salary in the technical communications field varies greatly by job. Figure 6 is a compilation of salary ranges for a variety of jobs in technical communications. As you can see from this figure, there is quite a spread of salaries, ranging from under \$20,000 to over \$90,000.

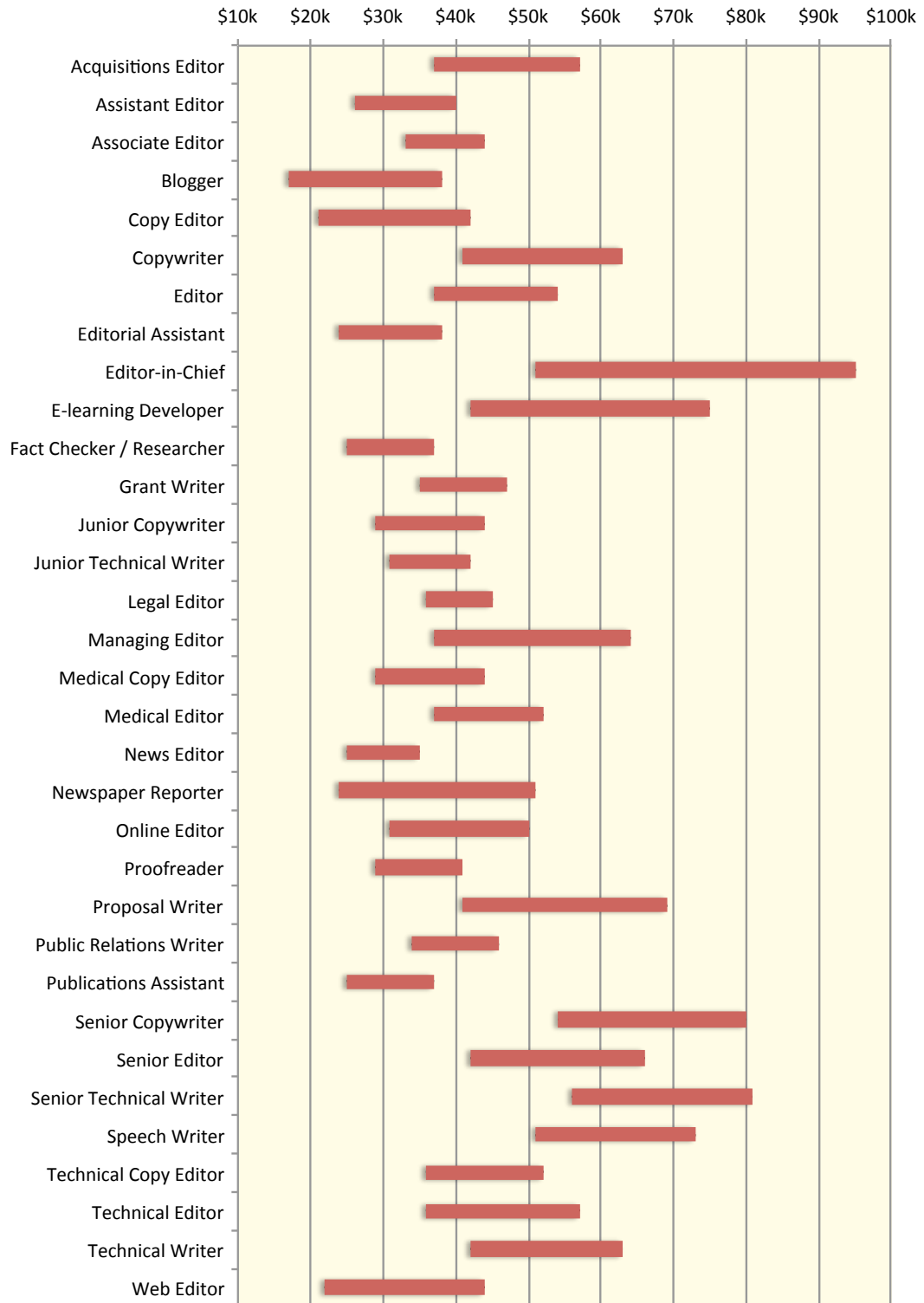


Figure 6 - Salary by Job Type
 Low end and high end of the salary for various jobs in the technical communications field. Salaries are in US Dollars. Data compiled by John Hewitt, a professional technical communicator, for his Writing Career Center website.¹⁹

Freelance and Contract Work

While many technical communicators pursue their profession by finding full-time employment, self-employment is becoming much more commonplace. Self-employment comes in two forms:

- **Freelance or Vendor** work is where you are in charge of all your own projects and finances. You seek out clients, file your own taxes, and provide yourself your own medical insurance. This provides you with the most flexibility, but leaves you with the greatest risk. You are directly responsible for how much work you get and how well you get paid.
- **Contract or Temping** work involves using placement agencies or seeking temporary employment with companies. As a contract worker, the agency or company will provide you with benefits, handle contact with the clients, and help you with filing your taxes. This gives you the flexibility to work with different clients and on different projects when you are available, but adds some structure so you don't have to be in charge of all aspects of your business.

Salary

As a freelance writer, how much you make is high dependent on your own motivation. If you work hard to find and keep clients, you can be very successful. If you tend to lay back and let clients come to you, you may not have as solid an income. Below are some guidelines:

- **Content Writing** ranges from \$13-55 per hour with a median of \$26.64 per hour.²⁰
- **Test Questions** typically range from \$3-10 per question.²¹
- **Editors** get paid from \$13-47 per hour with a median of \$24.75 per hour.²²

Of course, if you are doing contract work or freelancing through a third-party, you will likely lose a portion of that to whoever you are working through. But, there can be benefits to such relationships as well.

Finding the Right Job

Getting the right job is especially important in this challenging economic climate. Networking, seeking informational interviews, and developing marketable skills will help in securing the job you desire.

Networking

Networking is invaluable both for getting more information about your field and for finding job opportunities. Knowing someone in the company you are applying for is always to your benefit, so develop a network of people who you keep in regular touch with. Employers will value those who already have connections in the field.

Your network might be bigger and better than you think. Here are a three places to look:

- Use **current social networks** to find people who may know about your field of interest. Post on your Facebook wall, LinkedIn Status, or Twitter Feed to see who might know a Technical Communicator.²³
- Use **alumni networks** to see if anyone you've been to school with can connect you to technical communicators in the field.²⁴
- Tell people about what you do. You will be surprised how many connections you find just by talking about your work and your interests.²⁵

Social networks have become common place, but many of us do not use them to their maximum potential. LinkedIn is one example of such a network. If you do not have a LinkedIn account, I highly recommend getting one. If you do, start connecting with people and groups in your subject of interest as well as in the technical communications field.

If you do not currently have a job, stay active on LinkedIn. Companies can view your activity and would rather hire someone active in the field than someone who's been out of it.²⁶ Create your own group and list that as one of your current jobs. This will show that you are active and part of the community. For more on developing your social network connections, seek out free webinars on the subject from SeattleJobs.com.

Finally, develop your own online portfolio with an active blog. Regularly posting to your blog will help bring traffic and show employers that you are not sitting idle. Having work samples that show what you can do will go much farther than simply telling people what you've done. The old adage, "show don't tell" works as much for job seeking as it does for writing. For a sample of a web portfolio, you can see mine at this address:

<http://www.jonanscher.com>

Informational Interviews

Informational interviews are a valuable way to get more information about a potential career. All the information you can gather will never compare to getting answers from those currently in the field. Additionally, informational interviews can lead to networking, which may later help you find a job.²⁷

The best way to find someone to interview is through networking avenues you already have at your disposal. Explore your social networks, friends, and family. Find reasons to talk about your interest to people you meet. You never know where a connection might be made.

Once you've found someone to interview, you'll want to get prepared. Begin to think out what questions you might ask, and have some written down when you go to the interview. Here are some questions offered by a New York Times writer to consider for your interview.²⁸

- Can you tell me how you got to this position?
- What do you like most about what you do, and what would you change if you could?
- How do people break into this field?
- What are the types of jobs that exist where you work and in the industry in general?
- Where would you suggest a person investigate if the person were particularly skilled at (fill in the blank—quantitative thinking, communications, writing, advocacy)?
- What does a typical career path look like in your industry?
- What are some of the biggest challenges facing your company and your industry today?
- Are there any professional or trade associations I should connect with?
- What do you read—in print and online—to keep up with developments in your field?
- How do you see your industry changing in the next 10 years?
- If you were just getting involved now, where would you put yourself?
- What's a typical day like for you?
- What's unique or differentiating about your company?
- How has writing a book (starting a blog, running a company, etc.) differed from your expectations? What have been the greatest moments and biggest challenges?

Remember that your interviewee is doing you a favor, so keep in mind to make the interview convenient for them. You will not be asking for job leads—that is not the point—focus on getting information. That said, this is a way to build a relationship with someone

in your field of interest. So prepare thoughtfully and act professionally. Plan this at a time that fits with what feels right. Don't jump the gun if you're not ready. And don't overstay your welcome. Be respectful of your interviewee's time.

Competitive Skills

The skills you need are going to vary greatly with the job you find and the field you enter into. Knowledge of the field is always important, but is something that can be gained by working in that field. Figure 7 shows six skills that the Society of Technical Communicators promotes as core technical communication skills.²⁹ The Society for Technical Communicators “is the world's largest and oldest professional association dedicated to the advancement of the field of technical communication” and will be a great resource in your research.³⁰

Skill	Description
Writing skills	You need to be able to deliver information clearly and concisely. This is one of the “tools” of your trade. Understand how language works and understand how to analyze your audience, topic, and purpose.
Technical skills	Study the key knowledge and terminology of the fields that you are most interested in breaking into. Knowing the skills of your technical field is essential to being able to deliver information clearly. We are least clear when we don't know what we are talking about.
Tools skills	You need to know your way around the tools you be using to create your documents. Having skills with office software, creative suites, and web development are essential for technical communicators.
Listening skills	It is important that you know how to ask the questions that will get you the information you need. It is also important to be able to get the feedback you need on your writing from subject matter experts and the intended audience.
Design skills	Words need to be easy on the eyes as they are easy on the ears. Know how to use design, layout, and white space to make information easier to take in.

Figure 7 - Skills in Technical Communications
This is a list of the core skills required for technical communicators.³¹

Continued Education

Many programs will allow you to build your skills and earn certificates and degrees that will help you in the job market. The Society for Technical Communication is an excellent source for this.

Continued education programs tend to fit into three categories:

- Degree programs are longer and more comprehensive. They will end with you receiving some type of degree (Bachelors, Masters, Ph.D.).
- Certificate programs are shorter and tend to be more specialized. These programs are great to help you make a quick shift into this field if you lack the experience needed to get a job.
- Individual courses can supplement your skills without a degree or certificate. They require less of a long-term commitment. If they allow you to put a stronger skill set in your resume, they can help you in your job search.

There are two other things you should consider with any education you seek. The first is whether your classes will be online, in-class, or both. In-class offers a more structured environment for those who need that to stay on top of things. Online classes offer flexibility in hours and in location.

The second is whether your program has a cohort. A cohort is “a group of students who work through a curriculum together to achieve the same academic degree together.”³² A cohort program is usually more rigid but offers huge benefits in networking. By using a cohort, you build a network of professionals in the field.

Again, the Society for Technical Communication is a great resource here. In its section on Education, it has a database for schools who have programs and courses related to Technical communications. There are over 150 programs listed on the STC site. Figure 8 shows the distribution of these programs by type.³³

Schools with Technical Communications Programs

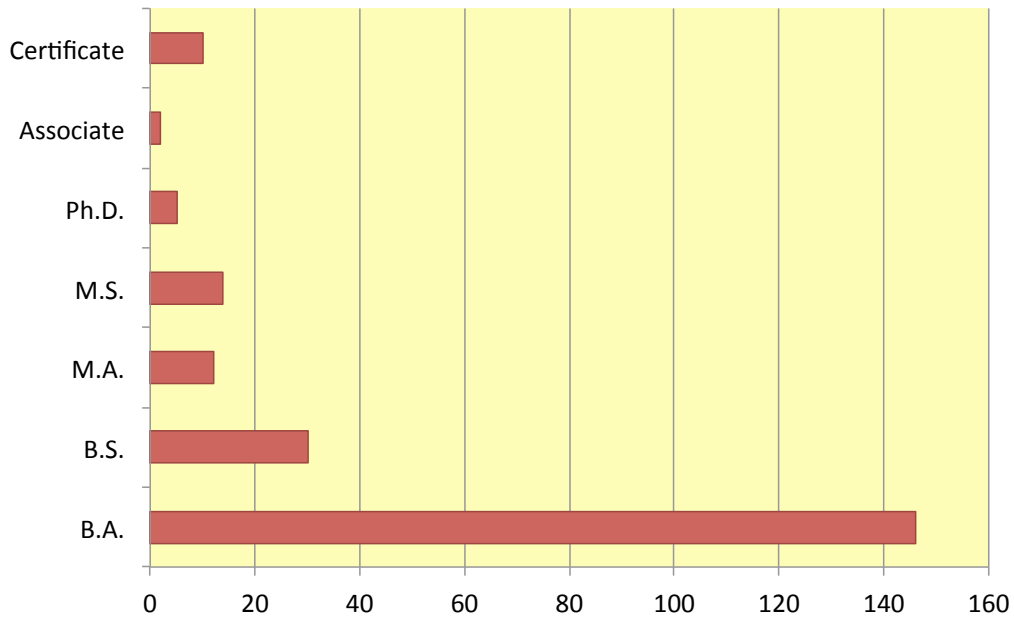


Figure 8 - Schools with Technical Communications Programs
This outlines the number of school programs listed by the Society of Technical Communications.³⁴

To learn about these programs, visit this address:

<http://www.stc.org/education/academic-database>

As you continue to explore your possibilities, remember to remain aware of the job market, of options for working as a freelance writer or editor, of marketing yourself for the right job, and of continuing to strengthen your skills through education. Technical writing is an exciting field that is always growing. You’ve made a good choice, and now it’s also an informed choice.

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