

What are Technical Writers and what can they do for you?

For most people a Technical Writer is someone who writes technical manuals. The reality is that Technical Writers can and do write more broadly than that. As a profession, we are trained to write material for any given audience, using raw content that we gain from subject matter experts (SMEs), existing documents or other research.

Each Technical Writer is an individual – in terms of industry experience, approach to the work, preferences for working environment, technical expertise, and even their ability to work with people.

If you understand your writing needs and you choose your Technical Writer(s) carefully, you'll find that the way you and your company communicate begins to improve.

Chosen carefully and briefed appropriately a Technical Writer can provide advice on the structure and format of just about any type of written communication.

In addition, a very experienced and competent writer will be able to plan a writing project, interview SMEs, manage the project, keep you informed of risks to deadlines and then on top of that, produce the material.

What to look for in a Technical Writer

First, remember that *you have to know what you need before that need can be met* – it's true for life, and true for Technical Writer recruitment as well.

Secondly – and trust me on this one – writing ANYTHING to a brief requires negotiation and client management skills. Yes, a good writer will negotiate with you, and manage your expectations. Just like any professional you hire to do a job. One little sentence, in the wrong hands, can take a week to write and still be off the mark! You are your writer's client. However, the end user of the material they are producing is also their client. A good Technical Writer learns early on that managing your expectations and reaching your end users the way you want to reach them can be a juggling act between creating great communication and building a good business relationship. Sometimes a writer will know better than you – and that's a really hard thing to tell anybody or to hear. Let's face it - we all think we're good communicators. Unfortunately, without training and experience, the greater the personal and emotional investment in the communication, the more subjective it is likely to be – and the greater the risk that it will meet your needs, but not your readers'.

If you can hire someone who knows your industry and your product, that's wonderful. In my experience, however, it's more important to find someone who can define and complete a writing project – with all the issues that go with that – and also has a demonstrated

ability to learn new technologies and meet the needs of a range of user groups.

An ability to learn, teamed with an approach that *assumes nothing* will produce fresh, professional work that really meets your requirements and sometimes offers creative solutions to your communications needs – solutions you may never have seen on your own.

Questions to ask yourself: *What are you trying to communicate? To whom? How much do you know about what you want your finished text to look like, to sound like—to convey?*

If you are very clear about who your audience is, have subject matter readily available, a real understanding of the effort and timing requirements to complete a writing job and a good, objective knowledge about how to achieve your communication aims, you can probably get by with someone without a great deal of experience.

If you need someone to help you define all those aspects of the project – from scoping and estimating through to delivery of quality product – you need someone who has managed at least one documentation project, has quite a few years experience, good negotiating and problem resolution skills and an air of confidence. When it comes to writing, everyone's an expert and you need your Technical Writer to be able to advise you and your subject matter experts professionally from an objective standpoint.

Technical Writers – more than technical

Speak to most Technical Writers who've been in the profession for more than a year or two, and you'll discover they've had to write for a range of audiences. In my experience as a Technical Writer, I have written technical manuals that were destined to be read by engineers and then been asked to write marketing copy on the same subject – for business decision makers who had no technical clue. I've written business plans, press releases, business letters, Annual Report copy, Human Resources policies and procedures, Board Papers and user manuals for non-native English speakers. There have been graphics, charts, Powerpoint™ presentations, Help files and multimedia presentations. Web content, database design and navigation design for web sites.

This is a wide range, but not unusual. We might be called Technical Writers, but as with most categorisations of human beings – it's important to look beyond the categorisation.

Technical Writers are professional communicators – and they can add value to your organisation in ways you never even dreamed of.