Thinking of a Career in Technical Communication?

What is technical communication?

Technical communication is factual communication. It explains how something works, and how it can be applied or used.

In the past, this meant text books or product manuals but now incorporates websites, e-learning materials and user assistance (online help) built into software products, as well as wikis, podcasts and blogs.

Technical communicators take specialist information – scientific concepts or installation, assembly and operating instructions, for example – and make it clear to those who need to understand and use it.

Having clear information helps people make decisions, and clear instructions enable individuals and businesses to gain maximum benefit from their purchases.

There is an overlap with general business communication, and some technical communicators create promotional (marketing) materials, document processes and procedures, and develop other content.

What makes a good technical communicator?

You need to be someone who can bridge the gap between the experts and those who are trying to understand.

To do this effectively, you must be:

- Able to see things from someone else's perspective, sorting the important from the irrelevant in a particular situation
- A fast learner who can explore products and services with minimal information and guidance
- A good face-to-face communicator who can build relationships with experts and question them skilfully
- An excellent distance communicator who can use words, pictures, diagrams, animation, and sound (where appropriate) to convey information clearly.

How do you work?

We may interview subject matter experts and the potential users of any product or service to gather information, as well as using a product ourselves.

We use a variety of software applications, including both standard office software and more specialist tools.

Disabilities are often no obstacle: where materials are to be used by people with disabilities, empathy with their needs may be an advantage.

What are the opportunities?

Key sectors include information technology, defence, aerospace, retail, banking and finance. Mobile telecommunications and pharmaceuticals are both strong growth areas. However, anywhere where clear factual information is required is a potential market.

Technical communication is a flexible career because of its cross-sector nature. You may be able to apply subject knowledge to different publications, such as moving from manuals to magazines, or to apply publications experience to different sectors, such as moving from finance to retail. You may be able to combine the scientific and technical communication aspects, by providing instructions for specialist scientific equipment.

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> *I'd fallen into a wonderful world where I could be involved with a large variety of people in different areas of a company.*
>
> **Gordon McLean**
> Technical Information Manager

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It can be a nine-to-five desk job, but some technical communicators spend time 'in the field', gathering information. Contractors move from one job to another, and freelances may be able to set their own timetables.

With experience, you could find yourself managing teams, and often become involved in related areas, such as usability, interface design and customer experience.

What is the entry route?

There is no fixed entry route. Employers look for a balance of communication and subject-matter skills. An aptitude for distilling complex information into something easy to understand enables some to join a team and learn 'on the job'.

Open learning courses in technical communication and many short courses for publishing software and technologies provide a skills-based route into the profession.

Graduates enter with science or technology qualifications, or with language qualifications.

What are the rewards?

Combining creativity with the practical application of writing and drawing skills can be very satisfying.

You will learn all the time, both to keep pace with new media and while familiarising yourself with new products and services.

Financial returns are good, with salaries depending on sector, location and experience. With experience, you can increase earnings or flexibility by working as a contractor or freelance.

Want to know more?

The ISTC has a lot of information on its website. Technical communicators have a wide range of job titles: technical author, technical writer or technical illustrator are common, as are information designer or information developer. You may also want to investigate job titles such as e-learning developer or courseware developer, if that is where your interests lie.

> " I realised I was quite good at explaining technology to other people.

David Farbey
Senior Technical Communicator

> " My background in biological sciences was ideal for the scientific equipment I was writing about.

David Jones
Technical Author

> " I get most satisfaction from finding out how something works, then explaining it to others.

Alison Peck
Freelance Technical Author and Trainer

What is the ISTC?

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) is our professional association in the UK. It aims to raise standards in the delivery of information designed to improve understanding and to support products and services. It also aims to raise the profile of the people who do this work. The ISTC offers resources to support you:

- Events and publications, including an annual conference, a free monthly newsletter and a peer-reviewed journal
- Accredited training courses to learn skills and become familiar with software packages
- Overview of current academic courses
- A mentoring scheme, providing support while you find your feet
- Job opportunities, advertised in our members-only forums
- Access to advice from experts.