

# Technical writer

A **technical writer** (also called a **technical communicator**) is a professional writer who designs, writes, creates, maintains, and updates technical documentation. This documentation includes online help, user guides, white papers, design specifications, system manuals, and other documents.

Engineers, scientists, and other professionals may also produce technical writing, usually handing their work to a professional technical writer for proofreading, editing, and formatting. A technical writer produces technical documentation for technical, business, and consumer audiences.

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## Skill set

In addition to solid research, language, and writing skills, a technical writer may have skills in:

- Information design
- Information architecture
- Training material development
- Illustration
- Typography

Technical writing may be on any subject that requires explanation to a particular audience. A technical writer is not usually a subject matter expert (SME), but possesses and applies expertise to interview SMEs and conduct research necessary to produce accurate, comprehensive documents. Companies, governments, and other institutions typically hire technical writers not for expertise in a particular subject, but for expertise in technical writing, i.e., their ability to gather information, analyze subject and audience and produce clear documentation.

A good technical writer creates documentation that is accurate, complete, unambiguous, and as concise as possible. Technical writers create documentation in many forms: printed, web-based or other electronic documentation, training materials, and industrial film scripts.

## Qualifications

Technical writers work under many job titles, including *Technical Communicator*, *Information Developer*, *Data Development Engineer*, and *Technical Documentation Specialist*. In the United Kingdom and some other countries, a technical writer is often called a *technical author* or *knowledge author*.

Technical writers normally possess a mixture of technical and language abilities. They may have a degree or certificate in technical communications. Many technical writers switch from another technical field such as engineering or science, often after learning the required skills through technical communications classes.

A good technical writer has the ability to create, assimilate and convey technical material in a concise and effective manner. A technical writer may specialize in a particular area. For example, API writers mostly work on API documents, while other technical writers specialize in electronic commerce, manufacturing, scientific or medical material.

## Methodology

To create a technical document, a technical writer gathers information by studying existing material and interviewing SMEs. The technical writer also studies the audience to learn their needs and technical level.

Well-formed technical documents follow common publishing guidelines. Technical documentation comes in many styles and formats, depending on the medium. Printed documentation has different standards from online documentation. Usually, technical writers follow formatting conventions described in a standard style guide. In the US, most technical writers use the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS). Many companies have their own corporate style guides, to cover specific corporate issues, branding or to ensure documentation carries a corporate style rather than any discernable personal style. The Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications is typical of these.

Engineering projects, particularly defense or aerospace related projects, often follow national and international documentation standards—such as ATA100 for civil aircraft, or S1000D for defense platforms.

## Environment

Technical writers often work as part of a writing or project development team. Typically, the writer finishes a draft and passes it to one or more SMEs who conduct a *technical edit*

to review it for accuracy and completeness. In some cases the writer or others test the document on audience members.

On a project team, a technical writer develops the overall project documentation, as other members of the team develop other areas of the project. For example, as engineers design and integrate a system, the technical writer generates the manuals that go with the system.

## Career growth

A technical writer has no standard career path, but technical writers may move into project management over other writers. A writer may advance to a senior technical writer position, handling complex projects or a small team of writers and editors. In larger groups, a documentation manager might handle multiple projects and teams.

Technical writers may also gain expertise in a particular technical domain and branch out into related forms, such as software quality analysis or business analysis. A technical writer who becomes a subject matter expert in a field may transition from technical writing to analyst work in that field.

Senior writers in some software documentation departments are increasingly called *Individual Contributor (IC)*. See also API writer. In API/software documentation, ICs typically work with a team of developers or testers across many physical locations. In such software development in "software research organizations," an IC plays an important role in the delivery of API/Software documentation.

## See also

- API writer
- Collaborative editing
- Software documentation
- Technical communication
- Technical communication tools
- Technical writing