



Thinking of a career in Technical Communication?

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

Alison Peck
freelance technical author and trainer

Each project is unique and provides new learning opportunities

Geetha Haridas
senior technical author

What is technical communication?

Technical communication is factual communication, usually about products and services. In the past, this meant product manuals but now incorporates websites, e-learning materials and the user assistance (online help) built into software products, as well as wikis, podcasts and blogs.

Technical communicators take technical information – installation, assembly or operating instructions, for example – and make it clear to those who need to understand and use it. Having clear instructions makes all the difference between enjoying a purchase and feeling like throwing it out of the nearest window in frustration. Clear guides for everything from washing machines and mobile phones to hospital equipment and engines are produced by technical communicators.

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

What makes a good technical communicator?

Someone who can bridge the gap between the experts and those who are trying to use the products or services. To do this, he or she must be:

- 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 and/or pictures to convey information clearly.

How do you work?

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

The materials we create are developed using 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.

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 technologies, such as moving from finance to retail.

It can be a nine-to-five desk job but contractors may go anywhere in the world and freelancers may be able to set their own timetables. Although the majority of the work is office-based, technical communicators may also spend time 'in the field', gathering information.

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

What are the rewards?

Technical communication provides a practical application for writing and drawing skills. If you want to combine



the home of technical communication excellence in the UK

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

creativity with objectivity, you will find it 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 junior positions starting at about £20,000 (depending on sector and location) and experienced practitioners earning up to £40,000. Publications managers and specialists with skills for which demand exceeds supply make more. With experience, there is scope to increase earnings or flexibility by working as a contractor or freelance, where rates may reach £50 an hour.

What is the entry route?

Employers look for a balance of communication and subject-matter skills.

There are several providers of open learning courses in technical communication and many short courses for publishing software and technologies, providing a skills-based entry into the profession.

Opportunities are available for graduates: some science and technology courses include technical communication modules, which give a good grounding, while other entrants come into the profession with language qualifications.

Postgraduate courses that focus on the communication of factual information provide a launchpad for a career in this field as well. There are currently three postgraduate courses available in the UK.

- University of Portsmouth
MA in Technical Communication
- Sheffield Hallam University
MA in Technical Communication
- Coventry University
MA Health Communication Design

Finally, a natural aptitude for distilling complex information into easily understood communications enables some to join the profession as a junior member of a team, learning 'on the job'.

Where can I find out more?

The ISTC (see below) is a good starting place, with 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

What is the ISTC?

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) is the UK's professional association for technical communicators. It aims to raise standards in the delivery of information to support products and services, and to raise the profile of the people who do this work. The ISTC offers resources to support those entering the profession:

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