Technical communication offers multiple employment choices, including contract technical writing. Pat O’Donnell, staffing specialist with TMP Worldwide in Bloomington, MN, speaking from the perspective of a contract house, says 60 to 80 percent of technical communication jobs consist of contract work, and of those, 70 percent are hourly contract jobs.

A form of temporary employment, contract technical communication utilizes writers for jobs that terminate upon completion of the assignments. Last year O’Donnell placed 77 writers in contract assignments.

Working as a contract technical communicator offers many advantages. New writers gain valuable experience in many fields, disciplines, and software and hardware applications. Broad experience equals marketability. Additionally, many contract houses offer benefits such as 401Ks and medical insurance for assignments lasting more than six months. Wages for entry-level writers generally start under $15 an hour, but good writers can expect a steep rise in their salaries within a year.

Eighty-five percent of contract technical communication jobs require the services of a writer in six-month increments, although jobs last an average of eleven months. According to O’Donnell, average permanent technical communication positions last only thirteen months due to the churn in technology caused by software and hardware improvements, preferences, or sudden industry trends (out with the old; in with the new).

Whenever the economy slows down, the job market slows down. When trimming budgets to look healthy to investors, many companies dismiss their writers, often viewed as luxury personnel. However, in a poor economy, contract jobs are more likely to become permanent, so technical communicators need to stress special skills or background training, such as medical, engineering, or programming.

Post Y2K statistics indicate that last year 60 percent of contract jobs became permanent. Recruiters prefer writers with a four-year degree in technical communication. However, degrees in technical support fields or in the computer industry prove viable alternatives. Clients also favor writers with credentials demonstrating good citizenship and hard work. Troubleshooting capabilities, project management skills, experience, and proven writing ability rank high in desirable traits. Additionally, writers who understand specific cultures and/or environments rank high in preference by recruiters and clients alike.

Recommendations...

O’Donnell recommends a strong resume that clearly states job skills and accomplishments, as well as a portfolio that demonstrates ability and capability. Each portfolio should include: objective, target audience, writer’s contribution to the project, and the success of the project (i.e. This new design is now used company-wide . . .).

Contract technical communication allows writers with limited experience to gain valuable skills in a variety of business applications. Excellent writing skills, willingness to learn, adaptability, and flexibility provide the footings for a successful career in contract technical communication.
From our Editors...

Last spring we sent a survey with our newsletter. We also visited classrooms on the MSU campus and sought input from students and faculty in technical communication and editing classes. We wanted to know what you thought of Techniques. Many of you responded to the survey. Some of you requested changes, and those recommendations are listed below.

- Write shorter articles—our time is precious
- Use more call outs
- Cartoons would lighten the mood
- Use more color
- Content—make it count, don’t just fill space
- Creativity—don’t beat a subject to death
- Use larger headings and more consistent graphics
- Write more articles related to careers—what’s out there and how do we find it?
- Past editors—where are they now, and what are they doing?
- Resume tips (students and professionals stressed this)
- Tables and charts where appropriate, for variety
- Wide margins—do you really need them?
- Overall, the paper looks muddy. Do we need the purple with the white recycled background?

We value your comments, and we listened to you. With this issue of Techniques, we present our new look, sporting the new STC logo. We bring you shorter articles, more call outs, better use of white space, and (in our opinion) a nicer-looking newsletter on white paper. In the future, look for more diverse articles, improved graphics, and fresh ideas, plus interesting tips, trends, and trivia. Let us know what you think. Your opinion matters to us.

Our online editors worked very hard to redesign the web edition of Techniques. To make the site more user-friendly, they conducted usability testing, studying ease of navigation, visual appearance, and overall design. A majority of respondents criticized the large amount of white space (blank space). Those tested also recommended changes on the terminology and search options. Downloading images took too long. And because we designed our site to be viewed in an 800 x 600 pixel display, we added a disclaimer stating this. Finally, our usability participants stressed that our graphics and buttons should be better quality. We listened, and we revised. Please visit us online at www.english.mnsu.edu/stc/myweb3/index.htm, and tell us what you think.

Tips: About our New Look...

For our new look, we created our front page design with Adobe Photoshop 5.5. Special thanks go to Wendy Johnston and John Murphy in MSU’s Printing Services for their input and advice.

We created a grayscale horizontal gradient at the top of a full-page sized document. We used grayscale because colors don’t always transfer well between Photoshop and PageMaker, the word processing software we use for Techniques.

To create the Techniques logo, we used the NicolasCocTReg font. The T is 120 points; the remaining letters are 60 points. We applied the emboss and bevel effect using default settings. We then added a drop shadow effect, adjusting both distance and blur to ten pixels. We positioned the text on top of the gradient and saved the file in TIFF format.

We opened a new PageMaker document and imported the .tif file from Photoshop. We downloaded the new STC logo from www.stc.org/new_logo.html and reduced the size slightly. We then added additional text and two rules.
Technical communication students always wonder if their knowledge translates into the skills necessary for jobs in the real world. What constitutes the level of achievement necessary to land a job as an effective communicator? Moreover, what must they know, not only to land a job, but also to stay competitive in one of the fastest growing fields in the world?

As a fellow student STC member, I not only invite but also urge you to attend the upcoming 11th Annual STC Region 6 Conference, *Channels of Communication: Sharing the Knowledge*.

Prominent professionals will share a wealth of information. Scheduled conference presentations are listed below.

- Discover helpful formulas and tools applicable to any technical communication career.
- Examine growing fields and trends vital to work processes, and listen to case studies that may affect your career choices.
- Hear what other technical communication students study, and apply their findings to your performance.
- Identify the tools needed to become a member of your professional community when you enter the work place.
- Learn about trends in past and present color strategies and how color enhances communication.
- Practice online communication strategies delivered in professional contexts, sample situations, and exercises necessary to succeed in the new online working environment.
- Understand strategies that help meet customer requirements and support good business decisions.

In addition to the available sessions, you will meet your peers and make professional contacts that can last throughout your career. This conference points the way to unlimited career potential and provides an excellent channel in which to prepare for your future.

The Twin Cities Chapter hosts this year’s conference at the Hilton Minneapolis North on Sunday, September 30 through Tuesday, October 2, 2001. Student member registration fees are $80 for early bird (no later than August 30), $95 between August 31 and September 29, $120 the day of the conference, and $50 for one day. For other costs and additional conference information, visit the STC web site or go to www.stcregion.org/region6/conf.htm. If you have any questions, contact Mollye Barrett at 414-271-1144, ext. 24, or e-mail Mollye@iversonlang.com.
I enjoyed college. I like learning, and I love writing. Landing my first job proved very exciting. However, technical writer/communicator was not included in my job title. Four years later, my title reflects my work. In the process, my work ethic evolved, and my abilities expanded. I changed into a more independent thinker and a more flexible writer. My character also grew, enabling me to survive in the corporate environment. While maintaining my sense of humor, I learned many things the hard way.

- I need to do things the way my employer wants them done. I learned to work with the company’s established documentation system.
- I learned to prove my worth. I let my skills speak for themselves.
- Imagination is as important a skill as editing and writing. Great documentation does not depend on using new technology to write and edit soundly. It depends on the ability to use established systems proficiently in writing and editing documentation.
- I learned to stay current on industry trends. As a result, I now work part time as a software instructor.
- I learned to keep the job in perspective because life exists beyond the walls of the workplace and includes my family and friends.

Writing encompasses many challenges. However, each challenge represents a building block for your career and a valuable addition to your skills. XX

Heidi Roberts

The hardest thing I learned since graduating from college concerned what I wanted to do with my life. I graduated in secondary education/social studies when few social studies teaching positions were available. I felt limited with what I could do with my education, but I found my skills transferred to other positions that led me to my job as a software instructor and technical communicator. Along the way I learned:

- Mistakes happen. Learn from them.
- Look out for your own best interests.
- Praise yourself as you progress. You do not always hear it from others, and you need it.
- Choose to be part of the solution. This makes you very valuable.
- Invest in a planning system (i.e. Palm Pilot) to keep yourself focused.
- Imagination is as important a skill as editing and writing. Great documentation does not depend on using new technology to write and edit soundly. It depends on the ability to use established systems proficiently in writing and editing documentation.
- I learned to stay current on industry trends. As a result, I now work part time as a software instructor.
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Writing encompasses many challenges. However, each challenge represents a building block for your career and a valuable addition to your skills. XX

Nicole Sowers
As technology advances, processing and organizing information quickly and efficiently becomes crucial. While participating on a research project for IBM Corporation in Rochester, MN, my focus centered on simplifying information to enhance product viability.

Over the past decade, technical communicators evolved their skills from traditional writing to information programming. Usability specialist Richard Sit says, "We integrate information in programs, such as web sites or software. . . . It's not distracting to the user. It's there when they need to use it." Technical communicators must incorporate this new concept into their writing. Writers must evolve into software engineers or information programmers. Many writers who have earned that respect now receive the same salary as programmers and engineers.

Writers must know programming languages in order to condense information and improve user interface. Visual designer Jerome Donney states that programming knowledge emphasizes the "technical requirements to deliver the information innovatively and interactively" because you're responsible, basically, for creating, formatting, printing, publishing, and delivering the book to the customer. In the past, this was all done by a publishing house. Now, writers, at least online writers, have taken on that full responsibility."

First, to adapt to the new concepts and demands of the job, writers must know and understand the tools available to them, such as HTML, XML, JavaScript, and RoboHelp. Programming may either refer to the coding of these applications or to the writer's ability to create and design information technologies like wizards and advisors. Wizards, similar to install programs, direct the user through a series of panels (next, next, finish). The computer completes the task when the user finishes the steps. Advisors either walk the user through a series of customized worksheets or they generate trouble-shooting tables. Rather than executing code, advisors deliver information based on specific criteria.

Second, writers must understand their environments by considering concepts like visual design, usability, discoverability, system requirements, and delivery mechanisms. By understanding their environments, writers can convey information accurately and effectively enough to make suggestions or write small programs that simplify complex tasks required by users. Tammy Peterson, manager of e-Business Information for IBM in Rochester, characterizes IBM writers as "CNN journalists" in their attitudes toward researching the best ways to document products by identifying and diagnosing issues surrounding them.

As complex technology increases and the amount of information continues to grow, technical communicators must become information programmers by adapting to and learning to use the latest advancements available to them. XX
BioScience: Communicating for New Technology

by Christopher Cook, Certified Crop Advisor, Agronomist

The importance of technical communication in the BioSciences industry grows with the passing of each decade. From the first hybridization of maize in the 1930s to the processes that allow genetic enhancement of today’s crops, accurate representation of the processes involved and the benefits to the end user are imperative. The question of how to communicate this information to a vast and diverse world remains a challenge.

Beginning in the 1960s, Professor Norman Borlaug of the University of Minnesota researched and bred more durable and adaptable wheat and maize varieties. The subsequent breeding and distribution of these crops allowed economically challenged countries to grow a more suitable crop for their geographical region. His discovery earned him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for the appropriately titled Green Revolution, but more importantly, it saved India, Pakistan, and many other countries from starvation by enabling them to feed themselves. Without the ability to communicate accurately the benefits of Borlaug’s discovery to his peers, the heads of nations, and the farmers growing the crops, our world would be tremendously different. Imagine the fears of people first learning that Borlaug and his associates physically altered plants. However, history proves the benefits of this science and the benefits of communicating this information to the public in a positive and truthful manner.

Considering the rapid changes impacting the BioSciences industry including pharmaceuticals, pesticides, conventional plant breeding, and genetic enhancement of crops, correct, timely, and clear technical communication improves public understanding. The BioSciences field should avoid arrogant, elevated language that can only alienate busy people in the agriculture industry.

Technical communications in the BioScience industry must scrupulously describe how, when, and where to use a product and must make that information understandable for the common consumer. Pharmaceutical, pesticide, and crop policies and procedures should be depicted in a manner that enables everyone to understand the benefits and detriments of the product, not just those in a particular field of study. As the BioScience age continues to evolve, the need for technical communicators in this industry grows.

The 10 Commandments of Workplace Motivation

by Roxanne Emmerich, President, The Emmerich Group, Inc.

1. Build self-respect
2. Don’t be neurotic (or disguise it well)
3. Show respect
4. Live integrity
5. Be fair
6. Value and reinforce ideas
7. Give them what they want
8. Give immediate feedback
9. Reinforce the right things
10. Serve others

Roxanne Emmerich, CSP, CMC, is president of The Emmerich Group, Inc. and works with businesses to help them revitalize their people’s passion for work. Roxanne was recently named one of the top 12 most-requested speakers in the country for national sales meetings by Sales and Marketing Management magazine. To read the complete article or for additional information, email marketing@emmerichgroup.com or visit www.EmmerichGroup.com.
Technology Need Not Eliminate Common Courtesy

by Alf Nucifora, Marketing Consultant, Atlanta, GA

It seems that everywhere we turn we are confronted by rudeness, bad manners, and in-your-face aggressiveness. It is time to review the rules of civilized business behavior, and practice them.

- **Using speakerphones** Don't use a speakerphone if you’re the only person in the room.
- **Conference calls and computers** If the discussion is boring and uninteresting, don’t join the call.
- **No bellowing please** You don’t have to shout to be heard! We know you’re important.
- **On time starts** Unless you own the company or rule the world, be on time like everyone else.
- **Presentation do’s and don’ts** Learn how to pronounce the speaker’s name. And as for you speakers, now that you’ve become addicted to PowerPoint presentations, learn how to design and use them for maximum impact and effect.
- **Shorter phone menus** It’s getting out of control—the constant number dialing and lengthened response menus. It’s time to shorten those menus before the customer revolts.
- **More quiet zones** It’s going to be one of the next consumer battlegrounds, and the smart marketer will realize that not every environment has to be filled with nauseous Musak or strident ambient noise.
- **Cell phones and meetings** Leaving one’s cell phone on in a meeting is akin to picking one’s nose in public or other equally offensive behavior.

Alf Nucifora is an Atlanta-based marketing consultant. He can be contacted via email at alf@nucifora.com, his web site www.nucifora.com, or by fax at 770-952-7834. (Reprinted with permission.)

Internet Resources for Technical Communicators

by Bobby McFall

Technical communicators benefit from networking. I did some research and located several good Internet sites that provide information and resources for various aspects of our profession.

- **www.stc.org** Be sure to visit the recently revised STC web site. It contains information and resources including employment opportunities, chapter information, and links to many informational sites.
- **www.useit.com** Jakob Nielsen, considered a guru in web usability, offers a weekly column, Alertbox, as well as informative articles, links to products and services, news, and recent interviews.
- **hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey** Webmonkey is an excellent resource site for web developers and designers.
- **www.frameusers.com** This is an online user group and reference site for Adobe Framemaker.
- **www.currents.net** Visit the Computer Currents site for the latest in technology trends.
- **www.w3c.org** The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) develops specifications, guidelines, software, and tools to lead the Internet to its full potential.
- **www.webopedia.com** What is TCP/IP, CGI or SCSI? This site offers a free online dictionary containing definitions for terms relating to computer and Internet technology.
- **www.pageresource.com** This site provides various links to web development tutorials and information.
- **www.itaa.org/software/research/softind.htm** This site offers an abundance of software industry information sources.
Meet...

Marge Freking and Bobby McFall

Marge Freking, a senior carrying a double major in technical communication and speech communication, looks forward to graduation in December 2001. She serves as a copy editor for Techniques. The mother of four and grandmother of five, Marge relishes her turn in the classroom.

Marge’s scholastic achievements include membership in the Golden Key National Honor Society, Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, inclusion in the 2001 edition of Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities & Colleges, and winner of the 2001 Robert L. Carothers Writers Award from the English department. A published poet, Marge enjoys experimenting with words, and editing gives her the opportunity to play with other people’s words, as well.

Marge edits graduate thesis papers for MSU students and manuscripts for MSU faculty members. She enjoys creative writing and editing and hopes to plan a career around those two pastimes. Marge and her husband Stan live in New Ulm.

Bobby McFall graduates in December 2001 with a degree in technical communication. Since 1987, she has worked as an administrative assistant in MSU’s Buildings and Grounds department. She plans to move to the Twin Cities following graduation to pursue a career in technical communication.

Bobby belongs to the Golden Key National Honor Society and the Lake Area Women of Elysian, where she lives. She credits the support of her family, friends, and coworkers in helping her finish her degree.

Bobby’s passion for outdoor photography involves more than just a pastime for her. She has received awards in numerous local and national photo contests and has had her work published both online and in hard copy. Bobby also enjoys web design. She created two photography-related web sites and invites you to visit them: krypton.mankato.msus.edu/~mcfalr/Welcome.html, and www.frontiernet.net/~mcfall.

Bobby has three grown children: twins, Dan and Stephanie, and Travis. She is also proud grandma to her “baby grand” Hayleigh.