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Backgrounder

This document contains my responses to interview questions that I have encountered recently while meeting with organizations.

What motivated you to start a career in technical writing?

I am a constant learner with a strong interest in technology and communications. Technical communication allows you to grow your career in many areas including publishing systems, programming, and videography, for example. It provides multiple paths to impact the organization.

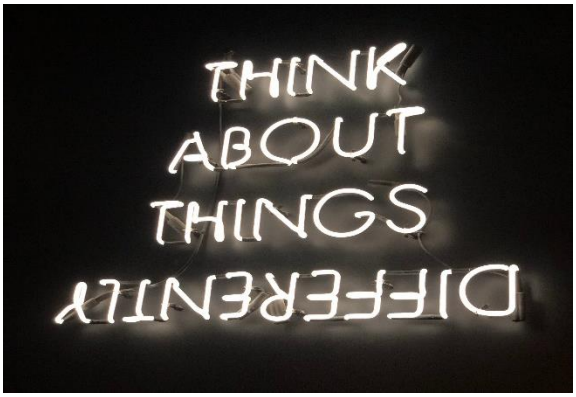
Do you have experience with any content development tools?

I have expert knowledge and experience in Content Management Systems, best practices, and tools. This includes Enterprise CMS including SharePoint as well as Web CMS such as SharePoint for intranet sites and WordPress for sites on the world wide web. I have written a white paper that fully describes these systems.

I am knowledgeable about structured authoring and can demo a structured, multi-section document that I created using Oxygen XML software and DITA.

What are the characteristics of good technical writing and Technical Writers?

To be effective all writing must be properly organized and have correct style and grammar. These requirements are the bare minimum to simply communicate clearly and effectively. In Technical Communication, information must be findable and accurate to be of value to the audience. Good technical writing must be tailored specifically to each audience, which may include anyone from C level managers to engineers to non-technical consumers. Each of these targets will have different requirements and strategies for effective technical communication. Executives, for example, require more summary information while engineers want explicit instructions and supporting data.



Technical writers must work effectively in teams and directly with Subject Matter Experts. They work in support of the engineering workforce and serve as a customer advocate by enabling their success with the organization's products. Whenever possible, a technical writer must have hands-on experience with the product being documented. This is true for both hardware and software projects.

Are you comfortable collaborating with other team members?

Extremely comfortable. No technical writing projects are done in a vacuum. Writers must work with their manager, SME's, perhaps graphics personnel and editors or other folks included in the process. I have many references from engineers and project managers whom I have collaborated with on completed missions that far exceeded expectations. At my last position I regularly led teams of 5-10 senior engineers in the documentation phase of their Site Assessment consulting missions.

Please note that some small organizations may have limited resources and a tech pubs staff consisting of a *sole writer*. These IT workers may do a lot of their own graphics, layout, and other specialized work themselves.

What do you consider to be the most vital qualities needed by a technical writer?

1. Be a constant learner. Expand your skills and knowledge to remain relevant to the organization and a valued contributor to its success.
2. Be a customer advocate. Realize that customers detest interruptions and that your work directly impacts customer satisfaction (CSAT) and enables customers to remain consumers of the organization's goods and services.
3. Whoever you're working with, clear their roadway.
4. "Fail fast" and modify.

What are the types of citations you're familiar with and do you have a preferred style?

Formal writing and some industries such as defense, legal, academia, and scientific research require specific and precise adherence to a style guide for citing references. There are many style guides which define a prescribed format for citing sources, such as The Chicago Manual of Style and the APA. I have no preference as to the format of citations but prefer endnotes to footnotes in most cases as it is less disruptive to the reader.

What is the document development life cycle? Can you describe the steps it entails?

Traditionally the DDLC includes 5 general steps similar to these:

1. Planning
2. Designing
3. Developing
4. Editing
5. Maintaining

However, this list really pertains to paper-based book production and needs to be fleshed out for modern usage.

1. Planning must include information gathering, meeting with SMEs and becoming familiar with the product being documented. Every documentation project must define the following items from the start:
   a. What type of document? (User guide, reference manual, online help, etc.)
   b. Who are the users?
   c. Who are the SMEs?
   d. What content exists that can get me up to speed? (PowerPoints, Project notes or charter etc.)
   e. What is the due date?
   f. In a structured document project, what is the structure? In the CMS, what reusable or boilerplate content exists?

2. In most cases the organization will define the design of the document which is a function of their branding department. In large organizations technical writers are not designing their own customer-faced documentation.

   If the document is a *structured XML* project, however, that structure must be defined early on by the technical writer if it does not already exist.

Finally, today, technical writing output is not always a linear book. Technical Information may be delivered online and through a set of related links that must be intuitive to the user and provide direct access to desired content in as few clicks as possible. All of this complexity is mapped out (or at least roughed out) in the design phase of the DDLC.

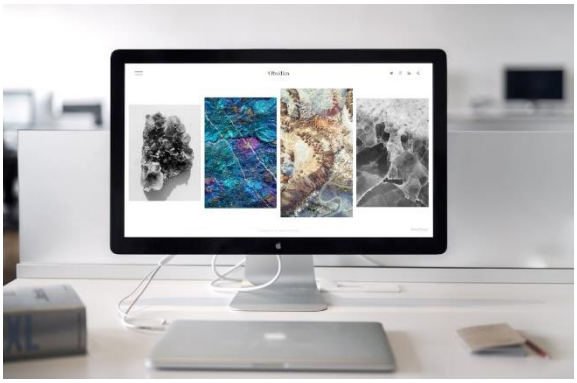
3. Developing content entails writing and illustrating. The more hands-on experience you have with the product the more effective will be your composition.
4. During composition, the writing and editing phases really go together except in larger groups where they have editors specifically tasked with reviewing the final version of the document. This is a style edit, not a technical edit which has already been completed. The editor will also ensure that the document conforms to the company's style and branding.
5. Maintaining, or revving, a document is necessary when the product changes.
6. In a CMS, however, content is managed separately from the documents it is used in. Individual items in a content library are created, edited for their entire life span, and disused when they become obsolete.

What are some of the Technical Writing projects You've Worked on?

- IT services: Interactive web-based deliverables for complex consulting missions involving teams of senior technologists.
- Medical industry: hospital analyzer user guides and training documents
- Biotech industry: DNA sequencing and cell microscopy system user guides and training guides
- Printing industry: imagesetter user guides and help systems
- Home healthcare industry: software user manuals and marketing materials

What specific skill sets do you bring to the table as a Technical Writer?

I have a Master of Technical and Professional Writing degree from Northeastern University as well as extensive experience producing all types of technical writing for hardware, software, and service products. My experience spans several companies including a 26-year employment at



one of the largest IT providers, where I was a valued contributor for the ability to work with very senior engineers and produce customer-facing output that differentiated the user experience.

I relish the opportunity to learn and acquire new skills such as videography, which is important in today's workplace and marketplace. Please see my portfolio which contains some samples of videos I produced for the internal workforce and for customers.

Describe a time you experienced challenges working with an expert on a subject. How did you resolve these challenges?

Engineers and technologists produce the organization's goods and services, and their role has primacy. The technical writer's role is to

support them. Recently I worked with an SME on a customer-facing technology paper on a topic I had no understanding of. Although I could not edit for technical accuracy, I was still able to reorganize the content, identify visuals that were broken, and find semantic issues and concepts that might be more clearly articulated.

The key to working with SMEs is to gain a history with them. The more you work with an SME the more comfortable and synced up you and that person will be in the writing/editing relationship.

What are the differences between Adobe FrameMaker and MS Word? Describe the appropriate time to use both tools

FrameMaker is a page layout tool and a structured authoring tool. Since you are comparing it to MS Word I will talk about the former and disregard the latter.

Although FrameMaker has powerful writing and editing tools its main feature is its book building ability. Combining sections, adding a TOC or Index, and adding cross references between sections is a snap for an experienced FrameMaker user.

I have extensive experience with unstructured FrameMaker and received training in structured FrameMaker when it was a new product which my organization never implemented.

Microsoft Word is a word processor. It is ubiquitous in the engineering community and is the main composition application for almost all businesses.

Typically, technical writers obtain source content in MS Word files from engineers or other SMEs and import it into FrameMaker for book building and publishing.

Microsoft Word has no real book building capabilities that will not result in corrupted files.

Once an MS Word file is imported into FrameMaker that Word file is “dead to you,” which means it is no longer an active document. This is true so that you do not have multiple instances of the same content available to the workforce, which could result in someone wasting effort by working on the wrong file. –

Describe the common challenges you encounter as a technical writer when gathering information

One of the challenging issues facing a documentation team is when to commence the technical writing activities. When a product is in development, it undergoes many iterations before release. If documenters begin too early the technical writer will not be documenting reality. If they begin too late the deadline may be jeopardized. The Documentation Phase must be clearly defined and supported in every formal project.

If possible, a technical writer must have access to the product being documented and use the product successfully. If this is not possible, the writer may ask for a demo of the product in a real-world context to obtain user-level knowledge of it.

It may also be helpful to sample documentation from a competitor's product to gain a contextual understanding.