

Thinking About a Career in Technical Writing?

A Quick-Start Guide to Identifying the Experience You May Already Have

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Have you ever wondered, “*What does a technical writer do?*” *Could I become one? And if I wanted to make the transition, where would I even start?* Believe me, I understand those questions because I did not begin my career as a technical writer either. My career work included systems analysis, software engineering, business analysis, management, and other roles before I finally said at 55, “Hey, I only want to write.” Of course, this was after an old boss said, “*You are really more of a technical writer than you are a business analyst.*” 😏 What she meant as an insult, God used for my good because my love of writing had been following me throughout my entire career.

In fact, it started when my boss at PwC (Coopers & Lybrand back in the day) asked me what I actually liked to do. My answer was simple: I like to write and I like to talk. PwC was good about trying to give their systems analysts a chance to do work they were interested in back then. So, when my boss asked if I wanted to write a methodology document, *even though I had no idea what it was*, I said, of course! And from that moment on, no matter what my title happened to be, I found myself consistently gravitating toward assignments that involved writing documents.

Takeaway: If you are considering a technical writing career, don’t automatically assume you have to start over. Instead, you can start off by taking a careful look at what you have already done in college or in the workplace.

1. What Does a Technical Writer Actually Do?

One thing I’ve learned over the years is that every company is different. As a result, “technical writing” can look radically different from one company to the next. So, the actual work of a technical writer may depend on the company’s priorities and initiatives at the time, the systems being developed or supported, and even the industry. I’ve produced documents such as business and functional requirements/design specifications and other SDLC or modeling deliverables, as well as user guides, procedures, manuals and job aids. *What* I produced depended on *what* the company needed, wanted, or preferred at the time. For this reason, you could be a hero at one job, but you could be a zero at the next. 😓 Your “success” is determined by what the company needs at that time, which means you can’t take temporary upsets or failures personally. Additionally, some environments have established templates, governance requirements, and review processes that dictate how the finished product actually looks.

As a technical writer, your work involves much more than just sitting at a computer and “writing” technically. 😊 You may have to gather information from multiple sources, analyze it to determine what gets included and where, work with various subject matter experts (SMEs) to understand a system, process, or whatever is required, and ask a LOT of questions to determine what each deliverable needs to contain and how it should be structured so complicated information is understandable for the intended audience. You may also have to review existing documentation and examples, work within established templates and standards, identify missing or inconsistent information, and continue writing, editing, and revising until the document is ready for its audience or reviewers.

As I have done these things throughout my career, I am what I call “politely persistent.” Because technical writers frequently need information from people who are busy doing other jobs, you need to be comfortable talking, scheduling/attending meetings even if someone is only free for 10 minutes, asking questions and following up without becoming a nuisance. Note: You will *not* always know everything before you start. Before I start working, I try to determine the requestor’s needs/goals/expectations, what assumptions I can make, what goes in the document and how it should look, as well as how much legwork I can do myself. *Then, I do it.* Next, I identify the open questions or issues that still need to be resolved or discussed with the requestor or SMEs. This all involves a combination of writing, research, analysis, and problem solving, which are all MAJOR pieces of technical writing.

2. You May Already Have Technical Writing Experience

For much of my career, my titles included business analyst, systems analyst, manager, project manager, and technical editor, but never technical writer. I had never even heard of the term *technical writer* until a manager I was less than thrilled with decided to tell me, “*You’re more of a technical writer than a business analyst.*” Ouch! Of course, this was back in 2012, when much of the work I was doing as a business or systems analyst included work we would now recognize as technical writing. However, this worked in my favor because as I held these positions, **I had to produce deliverables!** I thought I was just performing analysis and defining requirements, documenting processes, creating content based on the specific phase of the system development life cycle (SDLC) the team was in, reviewing and refining documents my team and I created before design walkthroughs, as well as leading those walkthroughs. But somehow, my work kept gravitating back toward actual technical writing.

I think God was trying to tell me something... He was leaving a trail of breadcrumbs that ultimately led me at 55 to deliberately assess/repackage/rebrand the experience I had accumulated in systems analysis, business analysis, software engineering and management over 20 plus years. It’s funny that I was working as a technical editor at the time (*hated it*) where I met a talented woman about 30 years younger than me who was doing the same work as me. **But** her title on LinkedIn said she was a *Senior Technical Writer*. So, she suggested that I use her profile as an example of how to showcase technical writing experience. That’s when I decided to look at everything I had done over my career. Then, I realized, ***I am actually a Senior Technical Writer too!*** So, I changed my title on LinkedIn to reflect that, and I began showcasing the portions of my experience that supported this new career path. Guess what? A few months later, I got a call asking about a senior technical writing contract position at Fannie Mae. 🤖

Remember that manager who told me years earlier that I was more of a technical writer than a business analyst? That was at Fannie Mae too. 🤖 But she was right! I was not a good business analyst. It didn’t align with my gifts, and I was unhappy. That is why I resigned from Fannie Mae in 2012. However, what she meant to hurt me, God used to help me. And nine years later, I was back at Fannie Mae, but this time, I was finally doing work that I loved!

So, with all that said, before you decide whether or not a career as a technical writer is possible for you, maybe you should do what I did? Use the checklist shown below to examine what you have already done in your career.

Your Transferable Experience Checklist

- Have you written instructions, procedures, requirements, user guides, manuals, reports, training materials, meeting minutes, or other business documents such as PowerPoint presentations or Excel spreadsheets?
- Have you written or contributed to documentation even though writing was not your primary job?
- Have you written for different audiences such as coworkers, customers, managers, executives or end users?
- Have people complimented you on your writing, asked you to edit their work or to rewrite it to make it clearer?
- Have you researched or gathered information from several places and organized it into one clear deliverable?
- Have you worked with SMEs to gather information for any of your written work?
- Have you compared conflicting information from multiple sources to determine what was correct and then reconciled your findings with what was previously documented? If so, did you make the necessary updates?
- Have you explained complicated or very technical information in a way that was easier for someone else to understand? Did you share that information with a group or individual in written form? Was it well received?
- Have you proofread documents and identified errors, missing or unclear information, and inconsistencies?
- Have you had to learn about a process, system, product or subject in order to explain it to someone else?
- Do you have knowledge from another career or industry that could be useful in a technical writing role?

Once you have completed the checklist, look at the activities you identified and ask yourself which of them could legitimately be described as technical writing, editing, research, documentation, analysis, information gathering, communicating with a specialized audience, or related tasks. **These are not throwaway skills just because you acquired them while holding a different job title.** They just may be the beginning of **your** technical writing story.

3. Look in Your Own “Bag of Tricks”

If you are truly considering changing careers and making the switch to technical writing, you cannot afford to overlook any relevant experience you may already have. Just because your previous job titles didn't include *technical writer* does not mean that you don't have valuable experience that could help you make this career switch. In fact, my work in information technology (IT) as a systems analyst, business analyst, manager and a technical editor helped me to gain extensive exposure to various methodology types, systems, processes, and corporate settings in different industries. As a result, I learned how to communicate with SMEs and professionals at all levels. While I didn't enjoy being in management, it did give me the opportunity to lead design walkthroughs, proactively manage project deadlines, and review other people's work, which strengthened my editorial skills. Eventually, I realized that having these skills in my bag of tricks as a technical writer was really a superpower. 😊

So, with all that said, let's start by taking another look at your career. Ask yourself: *What do I already know?*

If you are serious about technical writing, this is an important self-assessment. ***WHAT is in your “bag of tricks?”*** You might be surprised by the fact that some employers are looking for the specialized knowledge or experience you may already have. I was shocked recently to see a fully remote Senior Technical Writer position on LinkedIn that required “a current HAZMAT certification, along with supporting documentation and training records.” *Who has all of that???* I know I don't, but some of you might. **So, what else could you be hiding in your bag of tricks?**

Let's Start Mining

To get you started, I'll share something that is hiding in my bag of tricks. Companies like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac sometimes prefer workers with secondary mortgage experience, especially if they survived working there for a number of years as an employee or a contractor. Because I have worked on projects at Fannie Mae for over five years, hiring managers may be quicker to take a chance on me even if I don't meet all of the requirements in their job description. 😊 That is what happened in 2021 *and* 2022 when they brought me back as a contract technical writer. And as long as I am eligible to return under the company's contractor tenure rules, my previous experience with them is a HUGE advantage. Now, for Freddie Mac, maybe not so much because I was only there as a contractor for three months in 2004. However, when you combine that experience with my recent Fannie Mae experience, it was enough to get recruiters calling me about an employee and a contract position at Freddie Mac.

Now, what about you? **What industry-specific experience do you have that companies might find desirable?**

- System Development Life Cycle (SDLC) methodologies such as Waterfall or Agile
- Knowledge of Banking, Secondary Mortgage, or Financial Services
- Healthcare or Scientific backgrounds (*I saw jobs that mentioned a biology background was preferred*)
- Military Service or work in the Federal Government
- Specialties such as Telecommunications, Human Resources, Legal or Regulatory
- CLEARANCE!!! Especially TS/SCI with Polygraph! This is required for SO many jobs, but I don't have it. 😊

Maybe you do? What about some of the others? **Don't worry if your area of expertise is not listed here though.** I am confident saying this because I recently saw jobs on LinkedIn requesting niche expertise from construction to weapon launchers! **Seriously.** So, don't be too quick to discount what may be hiding in your bag of tricks. Your subject-matter expertise is a key part of your value as you contemplate a future career switch. Now is the time for you to do a careful inventory of **EVERYTHING** you bring to the table: what you know, what jobs you've held, what you've produced (e.g., job aids, presentations, training materials, reports, FAQs, meeting minutes, business cases, policies, etc.), and the specialized experience you've acquired over the years. It's **ALL** worth examining.

YOU do have a bag of tricks! Now's the time to figure out what's in it. Don't leave this step until you do.

4. Do You Need a Technical Writing Degree or Certification?

Some might assume you would need a technical writing degree or certification in order to become a technical writer. Well, in my honest opinion, I would say not necessarily. Depending on the job, you might not need either. My career as a technical writer was not built on having a technical writing degree or a certification. These assets are not in my bag of tricks. In fact, I don't have *any* certifications. But I did take a technical writing course as part of my computer information systems degree coursework at Clemson. The professor even said it was a pleasure reading my work. 🤔 Another breadcrumb? However, most of what ultimately prepared me for my career as a technical writer came from experiences I accumulated along the way. **You've got to look for the breadcrumbs:**

- One of my professors at Clemson told me that writing the user guide for our senior project could actually count as my contribution. Who knew? 🤔 This was GREAT news because I am HORRIBLE at coding.
- A senior business analyst who was assigned to review my work at a company called Concert, *then a joint venture between British Telecom and AT&T*, went from doubting my work to eventually admitting that he could not have produced some of the design documents I wrote himself.
- My senior manager at Sprint (*now T-Mobile*) said he enjoyed reading the e-mails I sent out to the team as I wore my project manager's hat. They were long and involved as I enjoy telling people what to do.
- The federal manager I reported to on a project at the Department of Labor asked if I really wrote the deliverable I gave him. I said no, I farmed it out to someone else, and I started laughing because, duh?

You notice I wasn't working as a technical writer in any of these examples, right? But during my decades of work experience, I had opportunities to write regardless of my title. *This all helped prepare me to be a technical writer.*

So, does this mean that a degree or certification in technical writing is NEVER valuable? Absolutely not. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, technical writing jobs can be VERY different depending on the industry, employer, or contract. As a result, some job postings may require a technical writing degree, certifications, specific tools, or very specialized knowledge. Like the weapon launcher experience I mentioned earlier. However, before you assume you need to go back to school or spend a lot of money earning certifications, I say do your research first. You may discover that the education and experience you already have could be more valuable than you realized.

Before You Spend Any Money...

Remember the biology background example I used earlier? Well, I just saw a recent technical writing job posting that said a biology background is preferred. Interestingly enough, the young woman I mentioned earlier who suggested I use her LinkedIn profile as an example has a bachelor's degree in biology. 🤔 And she is doing quite well as a technical writer. Having a master's degree AND a clearance in her bag of tricks definitely helped too. Now, does this mean a biology degree automatically lends itself to a technical writing career? No, but it shows that you can't be too quick to dismiss any degree that doesn't have the words "technical writing" attached to it.

So, before you sign up for any additional classes, degrees or certifications, I would start with a little research first. Go to LinkedIn, Indeed, or any company's website where you'd like to work to see if they have current technical writing positions. *Study them.* What qualifications, skill sets, tools, technologies, industries, document types, degrees or certifications appear most often? Then compare those requirements to what you already have in your own bag of tricks. You may discover that you have enough to get your foot in the door for some of the jobs you see. *For the record, very few people have what it takes to apply for every technical writing job they see.* So, be sure to manage your expectations as you look. While I am a talented technical writer with lots of good experience, I only qualify for a small subset of what I see on LinkedIn and Indeed, especially when many require a TS/SCI clearance.

Takeaway: Let the jobs you are interested in help you decide what additional education or certifications you actually need instead of collecting credentials as nice-to-haves or just because someone thinks you should.

5. What If You Don't Have a Portfolio or Writing Samples?

During my career as a business analyst/technical writer, I have never had a portfolio of my writing samples, EVER! Why? Because the work I did for companies such as MCI, Nextel, Sprint and Fannie Mae was either confidential or proprietary. And Fannie Mae, where I did some of my best work, made it impossible even if you tried because all attachments were stripped from outgoing e-mails. Also, your work was done on a virtual desktop, not your local device. So, nothing could ever be downloaded or saved locally even if you wanted to. Because of this constraint, I was surprised and annoyed when a recruiter representing Fannie Mae continued requesting samples of my work. I finally had to push back and remind him why I couldn't provide samples of my Fannie Mae work. All I could find was a document I had written for the Department of Labor over 10 years ago and an article I wrote on childhood obesity. I finally said, if this is a deal-breaker, then let's just forget about it. He later said don't worry about it. 😂

Maybe my previous secondary mortgage experience at Fannie Mae helped, but I can't say that with confidence. However, the job I interviewed for as a technical editor (*which required some technical writing as I adjudicated errors*) before my last two projects with Fannie Mae **did** require samples of my work. So, I offered that same document from the Department of Labor as well as the obesity article. Surprisingly, they actually liked the article because the company was working on a medical records initiative with the Department of Veterans Affairs, so I got the job. 🤔 It is important to note that I had never officially been a technical editor either. That's why I always say, sometimes, you've just got to go for it because you never know. And that is what I did with my two-document portfolio. But aside from these two pieces of work over a 20+ year period, *I don't have anything to show recruiters.*

So, What Do You Do If You *Really* Don't Have Anything?

Okay, so now you know my story, but **what should you do** if someone is adamant and requires writing samples? Well, if you still want to take a chance or shoot your shot, you may just have to get creative. I mean you might have to make something up. 🤖 Even if you are not able to find or share actual documents you delivered, that does not diminish the experience you gained from doing the work. Maybe that experience can help you create something entirely new. Think about your industry or specialty areas. What do you already know enough about that you could write *something* to showcase your writing ability? You could research a recent development in your field and write an article that demonstrates your subject-matter knowledge, as well as your ability to organize and communicate information clearly. You could also take a look at current professional articles or posts on LinkedIn for inspiration and write an **original piece** based on your own research, experience, and point of view. That could work too.

One caveat though... **Before you actually share your newly created piece as a writing sample, be sure to either get it reviewed by someone you know and respect or have an AI tool such as ChatGPT review it first.**

Just don't let ChatGPT fill it with those telltale em dashes. I hate those. 😂 But with all that said, if I were being pressured today, and I needed to come up with something fast, I would start with a topic where I naturally have an interest. As an example, I recently saw a job posted on LinkedIn that asked for experience using AI, preferably Claude. Of course, at that time, I had never used Claude, so I thought this might be as good a time as any to add it to my bag of tricks. From what I'd heard, Claude is a very good tool to use if you need analysis. So, I started by asking ChatGPT to craft a question for Claude that would help me investigate a problem I had been struggling with regarding the distribution of my Instagram posts. Then, I got Claude to compare various posting results from my Instagram account using data points from the past year. I was amazed at how well it synthesized large amounts of data from screenshots and gave detailed recommendations in minutes. 🤖 I could definitely see myself writing a compelling piece about my experience using it, including lessons I can take with me on future projects.

So, what if a recruiter/hiring manager doesn't accept any of these? Don't worry about it. **The truth is the truth.** Maybe that job is not for you. Surprisingly, in my recent searches, less than 10% of jobs even mention samples.

Takeaway: Remember, your previous work experience still has value even if you cannot put actual documents in someone's hands due to confidentiality or lack of access. *And your integrity is worth more than a writing sample.*

6. Be Honest About What You Know and What You Don't

I have said a whole LOT, but I hope I have sufficiently convinced you to finally take a good look at **EVERYTHING** you already bring to the table. You have valuable experience, skills and perspective, which is all fair game to be repackaged and repurposed. However, just be sure you remember that **repackaging your experience does not mean exaggerating or embellishing it.** 😊 So, as you fill your bag of tricks, make sure you only mention what you know *or have actually done*. As I told my son when he was first starting out in his IT career, do not say you can do anything that you cannot. You run the risk of being embarrassed when you lie. One or two simple questions from an interviewer can quickly expose deception. **So, just be honest.** Of course, as I usually do, I have an example.

After being home with my babies for almost three years and having only held jobs as a systems analyst and a software engineer, I found myself interviewing for a business analyst position. Mind you, this was back in 1997. The hiring manager asked, “Do you know how to use Word?” 😬 I said, “*Uh, no, I’ve only used WordPerfect.*” However, I quickly recovered by saying, “I am sure it is pretty intuitive though, so I should have no problem learning it.” The next question was whether I had ever been on conference calls, which, of course, was a big fat NO! But, “I am sure it is nothing that I can’t figure out.” Surprisingly, I got the job! So, although I am a fan of being transparent, just know that this level of honesty has not always worked in my favor. My honesty about not being able to write use cases and user stories or draw swim lane diagrams may have cost me jobs in the past. But at this stage of my career, I want to go to work excited about my job, not scared or dreading the things I can’t do.

What This Means to You

If you are ever stumped or confused in an interview when asked about a skill set you don’t have, start by sharing any related experience you **do** have. **Then**, let them decide whether it is enough. 🧑 Sometimes a hiring manager might be impressed by your ability to think on your feet. Or the level of experience they initially wanted might not be an actual deal-breaker. So, I would ALWAYS encourage you to **take a shot**. That worked for my last two contracting positions at Fannie Mae. In 2021, I admitted I had never written job aids, but I told them what I thought I *could* do instead. Then, in 2022, I admitted I had no financial modeling experience and had never written white papers, BUT I told them what I *could* do in a very confident, yet honest and humble way. I think that was the key.

At the end of the day, you have to remind yourself that **the jobs that are truly for you will happen for you**. This is especially important because technical writing jobs can be all over the place. So, let’s face it, *you are never going to qualify for all of them*, and you don’t need to. Unfortunately, employers have to decide whether what you bring to the table is valuable enough for them to take a chance on you. Sometimes they will, and sometimes they won’t. That’s life, but you can’t let that convince you that the technical writing jobs that are for you do not exist. **They do.**

7. Next Steps...

Well, if after all you have heard, you are still seriously considering a career in technical writing, here’s what’s next:

1. Take a good, hard look at your own bag of tricks. Think about what you know, what you have produced, and the skills/experience you may have been overlooking just because you are not a technical writer.
2. Research the technical writing jobs that are actually out there. Be sure to pay attention to the ones that interest you, especially ones where your background overlaps with what employers are looking for. You may discover that you are closer to being qualified for some of these opportunities than you thought. You don’t have to have everything. You just need to figure out the best entry point to **get in where you fit in**.

That is what I did. Looking back, the breadcrumbs were there for years. Once I saw the value of my contribution, I built a career around the work I genuinely enjoyed. Maybe technical writing could turn out to be a good fit for you. *Or it might not.* 🧑 Either way, I hope this guide has encouraged you to see what you already bring to the table.

And If You Need Some Help...

When I was on my last project at Fannie Mae, a manager I worked with asked me what my job title was because it was clear that I was doing a mix of technical writing and business analysis. I jokingly said, “I like to think of myself as a Documentation Diva!” 😊 I was joking, but I think the title suits me. I don’t like to put myself in a box when it comes to solving documentation problems. I reach into my bag of tricks and pull out whatever is needed to get the job done. My motto is, *I am not trying to finish, I am trying to be excellent!* So, the Documentation Diva is in!

*Whether you are considering a career in technical writing and have questions about your own experience, or you have a documentation challenge and could use insight or another set of experienced eyes, **I may be able to help.***

After more than 30 years of writing, reviewing, analyzing, editing, and improving written deliverables, I can help:

1. Think through your existing documentation problems and identify a path forward;
2. Review and/or remediate current or previous deliverables;
3. Facilitate internal or external review and approval processes for formal deliverables; or
4. Create whatever new documentation you may need.

One of my specialties is helping teams identify gaps and weaknesses, ask the right questions, and turn complex facts, gathered data, and information into deliverables that stakeholders, end users and downstream teams need to do their jobs. So, just think of me as a resource, especially if you would like to continue the conversation about your future career in technical writing **or** if you need help with a documentation challenge or project.

For either, visit www.ThatGoldenGirlLife.com/technical-writing. I look forward to speaking with you in the future.

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