

Finding That First Job

BY BARBARA M. BLOCK, *Central Ohio Chapter*

At this time of the year, student STC members may be wondering how to make the transition from school to the workforce. The possibilities may seem limitless, but you still have to know where to look. Similarly, nonwriters hoping to break into the field of technical writing may have potential,

but may not know what direction to take in their job search.

This article provides some helpful hints for three types of people: those just out of college and looking for their first job, those working in a field other than technical communication and looking to make a change, and those who want to add some documentation duties to their current job.

Recent College Graduates

Two possibilities exist for you if you've just graduated: You have a degree (or have majored) in technical writing, or you have another kind of degree. Those who have attended an institution with a technical writing curriculum are lucky: They will probably find placement services or other help through their university. It is the second group—the group with a different kind of degree—that may need more guidance.

If you have earned a nontechnical writing degree, three possibilities exist: You have a writing degree (English, journalism), you have a technical degree (engineering, computer programming), or you have some other degree (art, philosophy, interpretive dance). Your search for a technical writing job will be more difficult, but you can succeed. You must take the following steps to begin your job hunt.

Build a Portfolio

You need to show potential employers that you can write well. Before you send out a single résumé, build an impressive portfolio.

I know what you're thinking: "What could possibly be in my portfolio if I've never had any assignments?" You must assign *yourself* some work. Write instructions for programming your VCR, or write your own version of a Microsoft *Word* help topic. Include different kinds of samples in your portfolio: procedures, policies, fact sheets, and training materials.

The documents you create for your portfolio should be short—one or two pages at the most. You might have school assignments that you can use, but be sure they apply to the real world: no essays entitled "Foreshadowing in *A Tale of Two Cities*." Good writing samples are not the same as good technical writing samples.

Be sure your portfolio is assembled beautifully. I once interviewed a woman who had very impressive credentials and a good reputation in our city as a prolific writer. When she came to the interview, I looked at her portfolio—and decided on the spot that I would never work with her. Her writing samples were fine, but she had placed them in a

three-ring binder with handwritten labels on the dividing tabs. Her handwriting was terrible, making her presentation look sloppy and careless. She came across as someone who didn't care about the details.

Develop Your Résumé

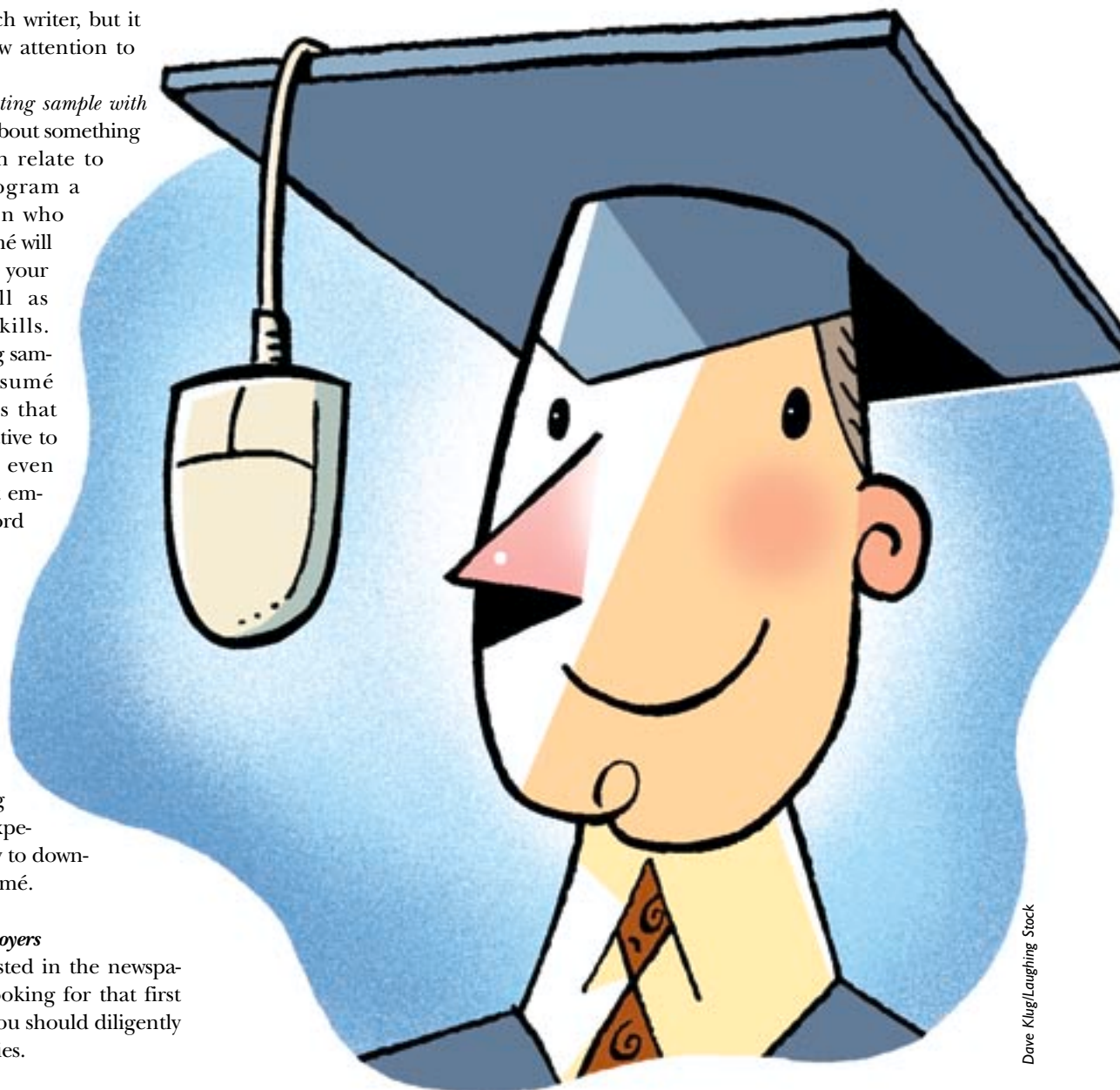
I'm certainly not an expert on writing résumés or cover letters, but I offer the following suggestions based on my experiences hiring writers.

- *Showcase the tools you know.* Since experience is not yet one of your strengths, you'll have to entice employers another way. Listing *FrameMaker* proficiency or HTML expertise, for example, is a sure thing. I don't believe that tools make the tech writer, but it won't hurt to draw attention to these assets.
- *Include a short writing sample with your résumé.* Write about something any employer can relate to (like how to program a VCR): The person who receives your résumé will be able to evaluate your accuracy as well as your writing skills. Including a writing sample with your résumé also demonstrates that you took the initiative to write documents even though you're not employed. The key word is *initiative*.
- *Be honest and down-to-earth in your cover letter.* Avoid statements like "although I have no experience, I can do such-and-such instead." There is no making up for a lack of experience, so don't try to downplay it in your résumé.

Find Prospective Employers

Not all jobs are listed in the newspaper. When you're looking for that first job (or any other), you should diligently uncover all possibilities.

- *Check your local newspaper.* It never hurts to start here.
- *Look in the Yellow Pages.* Software companies and IT consulting firms always need good writers.
- *Surf the 'Net.* Yahoo Classifieds is a good place to start, and perhaps to finish. There are plenty of Web sites dedicated to employment searches, and most charge the employer (not you) for the posting. A free service like Yahoo might be more popular with employers. Enter the keywords "technical writer" and "documentation." Also, don't forget to check for job postings at the STC office Web site, www.stc.org.
- *Talk to friends.* Ask any happily employed friends if there are technical writing staffs at their companies. If so, ask your friends for contact information. Although these connections might not materialize into jobs (at least not right away), they will give you a chance to start networking. If you impress people now, they just might remember your name when they have an opening.
- *Attend trade shows.* If there are IT trade shows in your area, attend them. You might have to pay a small fee to get in, but once you're in, you'll have access to 100 companies or more. Talk to everyone. Pass out calling cards (similar to business cards, but without the business



Dave Klug/Laughing Stock

information). Put the words “technical writer” under your name so people remember you later.

- **Attend STC chapter meetings.** Your local STC chapter holds regular meetings of professional technical communicators who share employment information and other news essential to the profession. Members can offer you first-hand advice for conducting your job search. To identify the STC chapter nearest you, access the STC office Web site at www.stc.org. It will tell you the chapter president’s contact information and a link to the chapter Web site, where you can learn the date and location of the next meeting.

Contact Prospective Employers

Once you’re ready to enter the job market officially, my advice is to slam the market. Don’t send out just three résumés—send out thirty. Be sure to include your cover letter, your résumé, and a writing sample.

You’ll get someone’s attention a little more easily if you send these materials in a large manila envelope. Don’t tri-fold your work or send it in a legal envelope. If you have time during the day, you might consider delivering your materials in person. Be sure to dress professionally. Even if only the receptionist sees you, you’ve made an impression.

In interviews or networking situations, be sure to speak well. It’s hard to convince someone you’re a good writer if you can’t articulate. Also, you should show sincere enthusiasm. If you’re not excited about working in this field, you probably shouldn’t pursue a job in technical communication.

In a Different Field

Like new college graduates, jobholders in different professions face some unique challenges when seeking technical writing positions. Depending on your current line of work, though,

your diversity could be an advantage.

If you’re currently employed in a field other than technical writing, three possibilities exist: You’ve been working in a writing field (journalism, advertising), you’ve been working in a technical field (engineering, computer programming, nursing, rocket science), or you’ve been working in a field that incorporates neither of these disciplines (food service, art, music).

Even though you don’t have experience in technical writing, you know how to do something: your current job. Before you leave your position, document it. Like the new college graduate, try to include several types of documents—procedures, users’ manuals, and training guides.

Use these materials as your portfolio and include them with your résumé for the job application.

If you are proficient in your current job *and* you prove to be a good writer, you may be able to get a technical writing position within your own company, or you may be able to include some technical writing duties in your current position. See the next section for more ideas on this topic.

Adding to Your Current Job

Jobholders seeking to add technical writing duties to their current positions face a win-win situation. You will be happier with your job because you’ll be working on some new projects, and your employer will benefit from retaining a good employee who can write documentation.

There are many statistics concerning the cost of training a new employee. One statistic indicates that, on average, a person spends four months learning a new job before becoming a productive employee. Since you aren’t moving to a new job but expanding your current one, the company won’t suffer a drastic decrease in your productivity.

Build Your Case

Although you aren’t interviewing for a job, you are selling yourself as a new-and-improved employee. You must convince your boss of three things:

- *You can perform new duties in addition to your existing ones.* Be forewarned: When you start out in technical writing, documents always take longer to produce than you think they will. Don’t make promises that you can’t keep.
- *Any documentation you produce will add value to the company.* Your company may not see a need for technical writing. You must sell the service as well as yourself. If you see a need for some well-written documentation, just take the initiative and write it. Be sure to do this on your own time at first. The documentation you write could be anything: a newsletter, a training manual, policies, or troubleshooting guides. Write several. When you have a good sampling, approach your boss.
- *You can write well.* You don’t have a case unless you can prove that you’re an able writer. Your boss may not know what a dangling participle is, but he or she will recognize typos and other careless mistakes.

Your boss could come back with one of three answers. If the answer is yes, be sure you understand how much time you can devote to your new duties. If the answer is no, build up your portfolio on your own time and leave the company when you can. A “maybe” at this time is good news: You didn’t hear “no” immediately, so keep plugging (not bugging) away by producing stellar documents until your boss sees what you can really do.

Persevering

I’ve always believed that people are interested in what they are good at, and vice versa. If you desire work in the field of technical communications, you can probably accomplish your goal with determination and perseverance. Because I believe so strongly in the positive influence a technical writer can have in the workplace, I heartily encourage you to go for it. **1**

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