

Hone Your Professional Skills: Find Your Writer's Voice

Technical writing is serious business. Publishing misleading or incorrect information can reduce consumer satisfaction in a product, or, in the most serious cases, lead to personal injury and death. Then consider the daily grind: churning out rigorous procedures, adhering to varied styles, and getting bogged down in highly technical details. You can see how, in my case, I forgot the important reason I entered this profession: an unrelenting desire to write. Sound familiar?

The Story Begins

I developed my infatuation at the age of eight, when I first realized the power of the written word. The day remains clear in my mind: the old handmade swing swaying from a cherry tree, the mild sunny weather. I can't recall the story I was reading at the time, but remember the feeling of being slowly drawn from my surroundings and into

the tale—and I was hooked. I knew I would be a writer some day.

When I first entered this profession, I believed my organizational abilities and technical background would provide an easy ticket to exercise my passion for writing. It didn't take long for me to realize that, while an important part of the process, writing was secondary to planning, conformance, editing, content layout, and production.

Although I enjoyed many facets of technical communication—including document planning, daily interaction with engineers, and the challenge of managing multiple projects at the same time—a strong desire to write prose persisted. After experiencing a reduction in job satisfaction, I worked with my manager to introduce new, diverse, and enjoyable writing opportunities into both my personal and professional life.

Together, my manager and I fleshed out a balanced professional development plan that included a creative writ-

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ing element. This article describes four simple suggestions on how you too can stretch those creative muscles.

The benefits are manifold: increased confidence in your writing abilities, sharpened communication skills, improved work-life balance, increased networking with writers and publishers, a broadened portfolio, and better-established expertise as a writer.

Suggestion One: Write for Yourself

Start a journal or take a creative writing class. Many opportunities can be found both online and at a community college.

In my journey of completing the creative writing certificate offered at St. Lawrence College in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, I have found myself challenged (who knew writing an effective short story was so difficult?), surprised by my abilities (me, a poet?), and liberated in free-form writing (what—gasp—no guidelines?). I have been inspired by some amazing pieces of writing created by my classmates with the encouragement of our instructor.

On top of this, I have forged relationships with equally passionate peers—which are bringing forth new opportunities to put pen to paper—and showcased my writing before the editor of a provincewide magazine.

In these classes, we practice giving constructive and nonconfrontational feedback on each other's writing. As a technical communicator, you likely review and edit documents created by fellow writers, so practicing this skill will directly benefit your working relationships.

By challenging yourself to write creatively, you'll build skills that you can use at work. For example, using creative techniques, you can craft your prose to be more compelling. You can garner reader attention by building hooks into technical articles or company success stories. Other techniques that you'll practice while writing creatively—and can then incorporate into your technical writing—include using dialogue (applicable in the form of technical expert or customer quotes) and building descriptive text (useful for creating effective headings and captions).

Let others enjoy, reflect on, and critique your writing.

Suggestion Two: Find an Audience

"A writer without an audience is like the Zen tree falling in the forest. The tree may make no sound if no one is around to hear it. A writer makes no point if no one reads it." On her copyediting blog, "A Capital Idea" (nstockdale.blogspot.com/2004_03_01_archive.html), Nicole Stockdale cites this useful quote from blogger Frank Catalano.

The technical writer usually remains anonymous, yet there is great satisfaction in seeing your name in print. Let others enjoy, reflect on, and critique your writing.

I am now a member of the community editorial board of our local newspaper. Thousands of readers are given the opportunity to scrutinize my opinions, while I have the ability to stir up discussion on local issues that are important to my family. This process will help build my reputation as a local writer.

Other possible venues include local writers' groups, community newsletters, blogs, and magazines of professional organizations (such as *Intercom*).

This type of exposure may take some courage on your part, and a certain amount of trust in the reader, but in the end will help you build confidence in your abilities as a writer.

Suggestion Three: Interview Someone You Admire

I recently interviewed an accomplished feature writer of thirty years. He provided me with excellent pointers for gathering story ideas and pitching articles to editors, and also shared general lessons learned during his stellar career as a writer.

Also, remember that each one of us has a story to tell. I interviewed a co-worker on his life commitment as a foster parent. This allowed me to celebrate a personal accomplishment of my colleague, while enjoying the process of writing a human interest piece.

I have found that, in the workplace, interviewing a subject matter expert

(SME) can be unnerving for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Feeling comfortable with this process while putting the expert at ease takes practice, as does the ability to ask the right questions in the right tone.

Interviewing someone you know on a personal level provides an unthreatening environment in which to build this skill—an indispensable tool that every technical writer needs in his or her back pocket. SMEs come not only with a wealth of technical knowledge that you need to extract, but also with their very own personalities. Asking the right questions in the right way to glean information from different personality types is a skill that will serve you well when you're jamming toward that Friday-noon deadline.

Suggestion Four: Enjoy Writing at Work

Find "the story" in your technical writing pieces. A fellow writer passed on these words of wisdom during our collaborative creation of technical application notes. This suggestion helped me not only enjoy the writing process, but also improved the clarity and flow of the information presented.

Break out of the mold and look for new projects. Managers are always happy to accommodate eager employees. Does the marketing team need assistance with developing product brochures? Would you like to try your hand at Web content development?

These are just some of the ways in which I am finding balance as a writer while honing my professional skills and increasing job satisfaction. So what are you waiting for? Break the mold. Try something different. Find your writer's voice. Get out there: create, write, reflect, have fun ... the world is an open book. 

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