

Good-bye to Technical Writing

After 25 years, I am saying good-bye to technical writing. For those of you potential clients looking for a technical writer, I am not the one for the job! I will write your marketing copy, your white papers, your web content, but no more documenting your hardware or software. I'll be happy to refer you to my technical writing friends who do excellent work.

It's been an interesting journey. I never thought it would be. When my engineer father first suggested technical writing, I replied with my best college sarcasm, "No way! Boring!" I was probably the only teenager who was taught to drive while being given lectures on the inner workings of the engine. Instead of "Shift now, or brake now, watch that truck!" my father would drone on about what the spark plugs and pistons were doing. It may not have been the best driver's education, but it was the perfect preparation for being a future translator of engineering-ese.

After many years of navigating the stormy, murky waters of journalism, I fell into technical writing, like a shipwreck survivor. I was joined by many others in similar boats—former teachers, bankers, reporters. (This was before there were college degrees and certificates in technical writing.) Although I missed the excitement of rushing out to interview people and rushing back to the newsroom, I did not miss the poverty and the long hours.

In my early years of technical writing, I was using many of the same skills I used as a journalist – the ability to ask questions, listen well, observe, analyze, and explain complex information clearly. I was also learning how computers and software work, an exciting new world. When my older son, an engineering student, sent an email from his UCSD intranet to my Xerox intranet, I spent the day showing off the email to my coworkers. The beginning of the internet!

Since then, with each passing year and job, the writing part of technical writing has faded and been replaced with editing, proofreading, spellchecking, desktop publishing, and configuration management. It's become less and less of a creative job and more and more of an administrative one. Those who love to set up records, manage databases, and tweak software programs love the new form of the profession. But those of us who love to write and explain things – like me – do not.

Not only has the nature of the work changed, but so has the pace and the workload. At Xerox, I had two or three months to write a user and reference manual. Now, it's a dozen documents in a few days. I think I can honestly say that my first jobs as a dishwasher and file clerk were easier to tolerate because I could at least let my imagination have fun while I worked.

It's ironic to me that despite the tremendous changes in cyber-communication, there seems to be less of an opportunity in the technical writing world to really say anything. To those of you who have found ways through or around it, I say more power to you.

I have appreciated the learning, the financial benefits, the test of my ability to focus and persevere and smile at many, many engineers. I've given it my best, and my father, who died many years ago, would be proud of me. So would my mother, who died recently, and called me brave before she departed. I feel I must honor her vision as well as my own.

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