

What to look for when hiring the Technical Writer

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Consider what you would do if you had to hire an electrician, a plumber, or any other skilled workman. You would make sure that the workman knew what you needed and then let them do it. You wouldn't be expected to tell them what they needed to know or what tools to use in order to do the job as long as you were convinced that they were professional.

There was a time when hiring the technical writer was easy. All you needed to know was if the writer could speak the language of what they were writing about and if they seemed to have the qualifications to communicate to the audience that they were writing for. Usually the technical writer was writing for a technical audience which meant that the writer had to have a technical background.

The process of becoming a technical writer meant that the person learned the skill through formal course training or in working with other experienced technical writers. Since the use of word processors, the emphasis has been on tools used by technical writers. Because most tools are user-friendly, they can be learned by high school graduates in a short time. Because most college graduates can use such tools and write good sentences and paragraphs, we find that many gravitate to technical writing even if they know nothing of technical writing methodology.

In spite of having a technology and business background, a Master of Technical and Scientific Communication degree, and many years of technical writing experience, I have lately only been asked about my ability to use the tools that are an elementary part of technical writing. The use of technical writing tools does not determine if a person is a competent technical writer. Staffing companies seem to have become more apprehensive about technical writing candidates because more and more they have been using the wrong criteria for evaluating technical writers. They keep emphasizing technical writing tools instead of technical writing skills. Tools are always changing but the methodology tends to remain the same.

The methodology of technical writing involves front-end analysis, research, interviewing skills, organization, writing, presentation, and usability testing. Yet, many companies looking to hire technical writers are inclined to list the tools they think a technical writer must know instead of making it clear to the writer, what it is they want to accomplish. In some cases, those seeking to hire technical writers were not professional technical writers themselves and knew nothing of technical writing methodology. In most cases they only needed a good word processor operator.

It is the professional technical writer who prefers to know what documentation is to be produced, its purpose, and who will use it. They must know this in order to make certain that they know what is to be accomplished so they can determine and explain how they will approach getting the results expected. The technical writer will want to know what documentation or drawings are available, who the subject matter experts are, and what tools are available. Technical writing tools can be used to make documentation look good but it doesn't mean that the documentation works unless the proper methodology is used.

If you have the need to hire a technical writer, it is best to make it clear what it is that you are trying to accomplish and then ask the writer to explain what approach they would take to accomplish it. The writer's explanation should convince you that they understand what you want and you might then want to know if you had the tools that they could work with.

It will provide insight to ask how the writer got involved with technical writing and ask them about projects they did similar to yours. Sometimes you may ask the writer to use their samples to explain how they approached producing each for a specific audience. If you are convinced that the writer is a professional technical writer, you can ask if the tools you have available would be all that they needed to start.