

Sunday, January 19, 2003

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Your Total Career Solution

Contents prepared by the Marketing Department

Creativity a key component to technical writing

Growing career in demand to those who master skills

By Alan Macher

Think "technical writing," and it conjures up images of a job that's boring, not creative, and suitable only for computer geeks. Susan Bilheimer, author of *How to Become a Technical Writer*, refutes these misconceptions.

Technical writing is always in demand. "Tech" writers produce instructions, manuals and online information for a variety of products.

"Somebody has to write the instructions for all the new stuff created by advances in technology," Bilheimer said.

She also wants to clear up a few misconceptions. For example, you don't need to be a technical expert.

"Non-technical people who write clearly and concisely often make the best technical writers," Bilheimer said. "Engineers and software developers can be too technical, too close to their products, and so have difficulty explaining their solutions in layman's terms."

And the writing need not be dull. When Bilheimer prepared an instruction manual for a local security firm, she was told, "Be creative, and have fun with it."

While many technical writers are employed full time by companies, others work on a contract basis, generally between three months and two years. Bilheimer said, "Here's the best news: More and more technical writers telecommute. It's every writer's dream to work at home."

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Learn about a fast-growing new career from author and technical writer Susan Bilheimer. Her book on technical writing, *How to Become a Technical Writer*, breaks down the skills needed to become

skills," she said.

According to the Society of Technical Communications' 2002 salary survey, completed by 710 members, salaries ranged from \$44,230 to \$67,100. Contractor rates ranged from \$25 to \$32 to \$75 an hour.

Another advantage is that you can begin at any age. "I began my tech-writing career in my 40s," Bilheimer said. "I know others who began in their 50s, as a second career."

So how do you break into the technical-writing field? Bilheimer suggests that you first look at existing samples of technical writing; for example, the "help" sections of computer programs you use, or your car's owner's manual. "You'll soon discover that technical writing is simply documenting steps clearly," she said.

If you have never written instructional material, begin while working at your current job, Bilheimer suggests: "Volunteer to write instructions on office procedures, a quick-start guide for a voicemail system, or a how-to article for your company's newsletter."

Bilheimer recommends that you explore writing technical materials for an industry that you are familiar with, or one that you've always wanted to work in.

To help those interested in pursuing a career, the Society of Technical Communi-

successful in the field. It's available as a downloadable E-book, or in paperback at her Web site www.techwritingmkt.com

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and other writing projects from her residence in Boca Raton. She has also written newspaper columns, TV and radio scripts, and magazine articles. "Technical writing has provided me with an excellent income and has improved my creative-writing

cations provides a database of academic programs, plus additional information on career education, at its Web site, www.stc.org

Many free tutorials are available on the Internet, according to Bilheimer. For example, RoboHelp is a Web-based technical-manual writing program.

Bilheimer's book is an excellent step-by-step guide for those interested in technical writing. It's available as a downloadable E-book, or in paperback, at her Web site, www.techwritingmkt.com

"Many people are often intimidated at the prospect of having to learn the software," Bilheimer said. "You can't be afraid to learn new technology. And most of the skills a tech writer needs can be self-taught. If you are a good writer, you can learn tech writing."

When Bilheimer tells people what she does for a living, they often reply, "Oh, I can never follow those kinds of instructions."

Her reply: "That's why we need better technical writers."

Even her son gets the message. "He created a game as a project for his sixth-grade class," Bilheimer said. "I explained to him that he had to write the instructions for his game so that the other kids would know how to play it. This, too, is a form of technical writing."

