

For a successful career as a technical author you'll need to be a fast learner, with excellent communication skills and the ability to convey factual information clearly and concisely

Technical authors write factual information about products and services, and how they work. You'll need to understand the product or application yourself, and then design and write documentation to explain it to users.

You'll explain how things are used in a way that is easy to understand. The information may be presented in the form of user guides for software applications, reference and instruction manuals for appliances, training guides, instructional videos or online help incorporated into software and operating guides.

You may also provide the information in various other forms including software demos and interactive tutorials, wikis, blogs and podcasts, using video, illustrations and graphics.

Technical authors work for a range of industries, including:

- aerospace
- automotive
- banking and finance
- construction
- defence
- education
- energy
- engineering
- government
- IT
- manufacturing
- marketing
- medicine and pharmaceuticals
- mobile telecommunications
- research and development
- retail
- science.

Jobs may also be advertised under titles such as technical writer or communicator, information designer or developer, content strategist, documentation manager or publication manager.

Responsibilities

As a technical author, you'll assess the nature of the product or service and the target audience, and will need to:

- attend planning and briefing meetings
- collaborate with developers and managers to clarify any technical issues
- interview experts and sales and marketing specialists
- work with translators, printers and service providers.

A large part of your job will be spent researching and gathering the information required. You'll need to:

- use the product or service in question to understand the technology and applications for which documentation is being prepared
- gather and analyse the information needs of the user.

Then comes the challenge of presenting the information. For this, you'll:

- organise information according to your user's needs
- write and edit text
- commission, coordinate or prepare illustrations
- use a variety of software applications to present the information
- index and catalogue material.

Related administration may involve:

- working on and managing multiple projects simultaneously
- creating work schedules
- marketing - publicising services and skills to potential clients
- keeping up to date with developments and trends in the industry and attending training courses.

Experienced technical authors can be involved in work at a strategic level and with the planning needed to manage content throughout its entire lifecycle.

What to expect

- Work is primarily office based, although you'll visit clients and spend time in the field to carry out research.
- You may work in teams, although smaller organisations may employ only one technical author. You may also work in a team with other professionals such as graphic designers, user experience designers, software developers and testers.
- Self-employment or freelance work is common after gaining experience, and can pay more. Contracts vary from a few days to several months and technical authors typically work on several projects at once.
- Jobs are available across the UK but may be more easily found in large cities.
- Travel within a working day and overnight absence from home are occasionally required. There may be some opportunities for overseas work.

Qualifications

Employers look for a mix of communication and subject-specific skills. Although you don't always need a degree, the following subjects are particularly relevant:

- sciences
- engineering
- technology
- languages.

Some science and technology degree courses include modules in technical communication.

Courses in technical communication and publishing software and technologies are useful for developing practical skills. Training specifically in technical or commercial authorship is also available. For example, the [Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators \(ISTC\)](#) accredits a range of training courses, including an introductory course for those interested in a career as a technical author.

Experience of a range of software packages is advantageous and so any degree that provides this will also be useful. It's particularly helpful if you have experience of working with publications software such as Word, Excel, Adobe Acrobat and Illustrator. You will also work on specific software packages and authoring tools, which will vary depending on the nature of the work you're doing. Check job adverts to get a feel for the technical skills required.

Although you don't need a pre-entry postgraduate qualification to work as technical author, it can be useful, especially if your first degree isn't in a related subject. Masters in technical communication are available, as well as qualifications in technical writing.

Skills

You will need to have:

- a feel for words and a good command of grammar and vocabulary
- the ability to express instructions clearly and briefly in simple language
- a concern for verbal consistency and an appreciation of tone and style
- good documentation skills and the ability to produce visually attractive instructions
- interpersonal and communication skills to effectively gather information
- an ability to grasp and structure large amounts of information and anticipate the reader's knowledge gaps
- an enquiring mind with attention to detail
- editorial judgement
- accuracy and a methodical approach to work
- the ability to mix creativity with objectivity
- the ability to work to tight schedules
- excellent planning and organisational skills
- analytical and questioning skills to get information from experts
- the ability to work successfully as part of a multidisciplinary team
- a good understanding of computers and other communication tools.

Work experience

It's useful to have practical experience that relates to the job. This could be experience of writing guides or user manuals, either for companies as part of work experience or placements, or ones you've created for use in a portfolio. It could also include other writing assignments that show your ability to communicate with the reader.

Any experience that shows skills in related areas such as science and technology is also useful.

The availability of opportunities depends upon the sector and location. It's helpful to join professional associations such as ISTC, which has a student membership category, allowing you to access advice and guidance.

Employers

As increasingly complex applications, systems and products are developed, more skilled people are needed to write user guides, instruction manuals and training materials in a variety of sectors. For example, you could work in:

- aerospace
- banking and finance
- defence
- IT and telecommunications
- medicine
- weapons system design and safety
- pharmaceuticals
- retail.

Some companies employ technical authors in-house. These are often in the larger computing, telecommunications, engineering and defence industries. Other employers include:

- technical publishing companies
- finance institutions
- research organisations
- the Civil Service.

There are also specialist technical communication companies employing technical authors to work for a variety of clients.

Professional development

Training is mostly carried out on the job but you can also take external training courses to supplement your knowledge and develop your skills. The ISTC, for example, accredits a range of technical authorship courses. For a list of courses and training providers, see [ISTC: Learning and Skills](#).

The ISTC also runs a mentoring scheme for its entry-level members, which is useful when first starting your career. On the scheme, you're paired up with a more senior member who is able to provide advice and guidance.

You'll need to undertake continuing professional development (CPD) throughout your career in order to keep up to date with developments in the profession and with changes in the software packages used to create manuals and guides. Membership of the ISTC is useful as they run a range of events and conferences, produce trade publications and provide access to advice from experts. They also provide advice on the type of activities that count towards CPD.

As you develop your skills and experience, you may be eligible to become a Member of the ISTC and, eventually, a Fellow. For details on the different levels available as you develop professionally, see [ISTC: Grades of Membership](#).

You can also do further study in technical communication at Masters level. Many employers will be happy to support you and may give you time off for classes or even help with funding.

Career prospects

You'll typically start out your career in a junior technical author role and will progress to senior technical author as you gain skills and experience. You may progress from there to project leader or editor. With more experience, you can go on to managing teams or become more involved in related areas such as usability, interface design, customer experience, training and quality assurance.

You may have to move between organisations to achieve career progression, especially if you're working for a small company with only one technical author. However, you'll have flexibility to work across different sectors, for example finance and pharmaceutical, or to use your specialist knowledge for different publications, such as writing manuals or magazines. It may even be possible to use your science and communication skills to provide instruction for specialist scientific equipment.

With experience, and once you've built up a network of contacts, there are opportunities to become a freelancer or consultant. This work tends to be project-based and may lead to a higher salary or freedom to choose assignments.