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## Becoming a Technical Writer

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# Becoming a Technical Writer

By Janet Basdell

*Plain Words Founder and Director*

You don't necessarily need formal qualifications to become a technical writer. But you do need to be able to write clearly and succinctly. A background in a related profession would be useful — in my case I started as a technical translator, before becoming an editor and then a writer. Experience in journalism or writing for contract publishers (they do corporate magazines and part-works) would also be helpful. Plus you need the ability to get to grips with IT applications quickly.

One way to see if you've got what it takes, is to write your own user guide for a video player (or similar device). Put yourself in the position of a first-time user and create a logical step-by-step sequence for each 'task', e.g. record a film on one channel while you are watching another, record a film later in the evening when you'll be out. Then give the guide to a friend or family member and see how they get on learning to use the video. If they come back full of praise about how easy it was to follow your guide, you'll know you are on the right track.

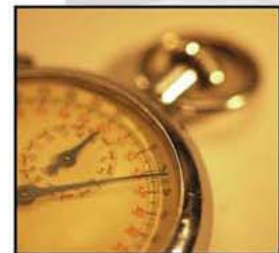
Your next step would be to put your homespun user guide to good practical use - by handing it out as an example of your abilities when applying for technical writing jobs or contract work. Include a copy of the manufacturer-supplied guide for comparison. Yours should of course be better! Obviously this won't have the same impact as a portfolio of work you've done for Microsoft or Sun Microsystems. But it might get you a start. Writing a user guide off your own bat shows commitment and determination. Few employers worth their salt will ignore these character traits.

## The Key to Success is Persistence

Besides writing your own user guide, you will need to study all the books, periodicals, websites, and ezines you can find that are devoted to technical writing. Soak up and learn everything you can. And don't forget to keep honing your skills. If you have the time, try to write a short user guide every week. For instance, you could rewrite the information leaflet from a packet of paracetamol, endeavouring to make it clearer and easier to understand than the original. Do this kind of thing regularly and within months your abilities will begin to show a professional edge. The secret is persistence. Remember, Shakespeare had to write a hell of a lot of plays before he achieved excellence and duly hit the Elizabethan big time.

## How to Become a Technical Writer eBook

An excellent resource that will help you on your way to becoming a technical writer is Susan Bilheimer's *How to Become a Technical Writer*



eBook. It's in PDF format and can be downloaded from the Web. You can find out more by going to...

<http://www.techwritingmkt.com/>

Briefly, though, Bilheimer was a struggling freelance journalist, who needed a way to use her skills more lucratively. Technical writing looked like the answer. At first, she had no real idea what the technical authoring field was about. But after much study and practise, she forged a successful career out of her ability to write and her love of technology.

Her eBook is a "must have" for the aspiring technical writer. And at \$10.95, it is a bargain (many "how-to" eBooks by IT and Internet professionals retail at \$29 plus)

### Technical Writing Courses

Susan Bilheimer taught herself the art (and science) of technical writing. And she is not alone: informal statistics show that around three quarters of technical writers are also self-taught. But not everyone wants to do it for themselves. You might lack confidence or prefer to have an outside stimulus to motivate you. In which case, you could do a course in technical writing - and use the qualifications you get to help you find work.

A number of universities and training companies offer courses in technical writing. Some are good, some not so good. The reason for this is there's no set of educational standards for the technical writer; nor is there a central body setting out what should and shouldn't be on the curriculum of technical writing courses. But this may soon change as the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) is in the process of creating a set of National Occupational Standards for the United Kingdom.

(URL: [www.istc.org.uk](http://www.istc.org.uk))

In the meantime, here are a couple of recommended courses in technical writing:

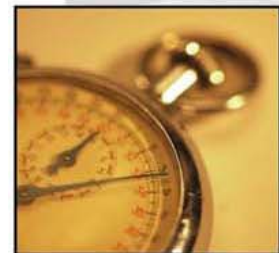
#### Sheffield Hallam University

##### MA in Technical Authorship (MATA)

3-Year Distance Learning Course

URL: <http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/ta/html/homepage.htm>

In 1991, the School of Cultural Studies of Sheffield Hallam University set up the first distance-learning, postgraduate course in technical communication in the UK. Dr. Noel Williams developed the course in collaboration with representatives from the technical documentation profession - who believed there was a need for a postgraduate qualification in their field.



## Course Structure

The MATA course is taught solely by distance learning and should take three years to complete.

**Year 1:** Certificate Programme - teaches you the basics of technical writing.

**Year 2:** Diploma Programme - teaches you more advanced and specialised topics

**Year 3:** Master's Programme - allows you to explore an aspect of technical and business communication in detail.

You can study in your own time, following a timetable that fits your personal schedule. The course is designed so that each year can be completed in 10 months, but if need be you can take 18 months. Another big bonus is you don't have to take the complete 3-year course. You can just take Year 1, or Years 1 & 2 if you so choose.

## Coventry University

### BA Hons in Communication Authoring & Design (CAD)

3-Year Full Time Undergraduate Course

URL: [www.csad.cov.ac.uk/courses/ugrad/cad.htm](http://www.csad.cov.ac.uk/courses/ugrad/cad.htm)

The course takes 3-years, and runs from September to June for 30 weeks each year. It is put together in modules and you are expected to pass a set number of modules to progress to the next stage.

#### Modules include:

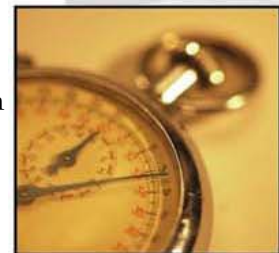
**Year 1:** Document creation and design, technical communication, computers and design, accuracy in writing, usability.

**Year 2:** Electronic editing and design, hypertext, project management.

**Year 3:** Research methods and evaluation, document management, and a self-initiated project.

If you have been on any good technical writing courses, or know of any helpful teach yourself books/eBooks, I'd be pleased to hear from you.

Email me on: <mailto:feedback@plainwords.co.uk>



# Plain Words – The Big Picture

## Technical Writing & Course Development

Planning, writing and producing Help systems, HTML, on-line material, traditional manuals. Designing and writing bespoke courses for your products and services, whether tutor-led, CBT or e-learning. Presenting 'train the trainer' or end user courses.



## Specialist Search & Selection

Helping you to recruit permanent or contract documentation staff:

- Technical Authors & Editors
- Trainers
- Localisation Specialists
- Information Managers
- Documentation Managers
- Copy Writers
- Project Managers
- Project Coordinators
- Instructional Designers
- Bid & Proposal Writers
- Web Content Developers
- Knowledge Managers

## Writing Skills Training Courses

- Structuring & Writing Reports
- Designing & Writing Help Systems
- Writing Winning Bids & Proposals
- Writing Effective Letters & Emails
- Designing & Writing Technical Documents
- Indexing On-line & Printed Material
- Estimating & Planning Technical Documents
- Writing for the Web



## Bids Consultancy & Training

**Bid**worker, a division of Plain Words, is dedicated to providing bids consultancy and training. Writing, editing and formatting of bids and proposals. 'How to Write Winning Bids and Proposals' training course. Plain Words own **bid**worker™ software to automate much of the process of compiling proposals.

*"Excellent service, highly skilled authors. All deadlines have been met!"*  
*Giovanni Calamida, European Patent Office*

## Catalogues

Plain Words **catalogue**worker™ enables you to create high quality printed or online catalogues in minutes. This is a simple and speedy way to create large catalogues that would otherwise need to be built, fully typeset and formatted. It also caters for multi-currency, multi-languages and different discount schemes.



## Publicity & Copywriting

Inject selling power into your communications with Plain Words' advertising and PR services. Writing or editing sales copy, web content, articles and newsletters. Publicity campaigns and promotion via the media or through your website.

## Other Services

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