TW

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Hiring a Technical Writer:

The Playbook

Introduction

Hiring for any position is always a risk; there are many unknowns in the equation. The standard practices developed over time - CVs, practical tests, and interviews - attempt to mitigate those unknowns. But at the end of the process, you can never really be sure if the person you're hiring is actually going to work out.

You might have it a bit easier when hiring for technical jobs. After all, you can test the candidate's practical skills against what they claim on their CV. Can they do the job or can't they? This, unfortunately, is also never a sure thing. If the exercise you give the candidate to do is flawed in what it's testing, or if the analysis of the output is either inaccurate or mistaken, you could stand to lose out on hiring a good candidate, or worse, you could hire the wrong person altogether.

In terms of technical capabilities, Technical Writers (TWs) are no different to Software Developers, IT Admins, or Quality Assurance Engineers. Every TW has a specific skill set that they developed over time through training and experience. They specialize in certain types of technical writing, focus on specific hi-tech domains, and have expertise in sometimes complex authoring tools and environments. So, as with other hi-tech professionals, when you hire a Technical Writer, you need to be careful when filtering out candidates so that you find the right person with the right skills for the position.

This ebook attempts to shed some light on best practices for hiring your next TW by describing the TW hiring process and providing suggestions to consider. To this end, I've drawn on my long-standing fascination with Human Resources, my years of practical experience as a Documentation Manager hiring TWs (mostly successfully, sometimes not), and my time on the other side of the desk, as a technical writing job candidate. For balance (and validation), I tapped my network of technical writing, marketing, and HR leaders. Their opinions and ideas about hiring TWs are peppered throughout these pages. You'll find the complete list of these generous contributors in the Acknowledgements section at the end.

Enjoy.

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Chapter 1: Get to Know Your Technical Writers

Where Technical Writers Come From

Technical Writers arrive at their profession in many different ways. Some TWs are former programmers or engineers who decided to change careers. Other TWs went out and studied for a Technical Communications degree or certificate. Some TWs got their start accidentally by being tasked with writing the documentation because nobody else did it, and it just became their job. My path to technical writing was a mix of these. One of my first jobs in high-tech, many years ago, was as an Administration Officer in a small software company in Melbourne, Australia. Before I left, I wrote a 100-page document describing all the tasks of my job and how to do them so my successor would have an easier time of it. Years later, I took a technical writing course and only then did I realize that I already had experience as a TW - I'd written an extensive Operations Guide five years prior.

No one path to technical writing is necessarily better than the other. A talented TW will pick up industry standards along the way and could become as good a TW as someone with a degree. Conversely, having a degree only means you passed a course and doesn't guarantee quality. A TW with many years of experience could still be only a mediocre writer who "just got along". So, when thinking about hiring a Technical Writer, their background is less important than you might think. What you really need to do is figure out what type of writer you need.

The Two Types of Technical Writers

The type of TW you need depends on your product, technology domain, and the types of documents (or other content) your users require.

I like to categorize TWs into two main types: Non-technical Technical Writers and Technical-Technical Writers.

A **Non-technical Technical Writer** (NTTW) is a TW who focuses on user-level documentation, without really getting into the nuts and bolts of the technology. They aren't curious as to how the technology works, but are good at writing basic User Guides, How-To Guides, Getting Started Guides, and so on. If your developers write their own documents and just need someone to clean them up, format and publish them, or if basic user-level docs are all you need, an NTTW is what you're looking for.

A **Technical-Technical Writer** (TTW) is a TW who creates content for technical consumers. TTWs write detailed Installation, Admin, and Configuration Guides, API Guides, SDK Guides, and so on. A TTW could be a former programmer or engineer, a TW with a technical degree, a former CSM or technician, or someone who understands technology on a deeper level and can communicate complex technical ideas simply. TTWs also write user-level documentation because, well, why wouldn't they? Often, their user-level documentation is of higher quality because they understand the technology behind it. It's possible that, with experience and some training, a smart NTTW can become a TTW. Good TTWs can be very hard to find.

Take-aways

- Technical Writers join the profession from many different backgrounds; one is not necessarily superior to the other.
- Formal qualifications and years of experience are not guarantees of quality.
- There are two types of Technical Writers: Non-technical Technical Writers and Technical -Technical Writers

Chapter 2: Technical Writer Traits

The process for hiring Technical Writers isn't very different from the process used to hire other professionals. After carefully considering the type of TW you need, look into the company culture they will be joining. The size of the company, the TW's role within the company, the tasks that they'll be expected to do, and their expected level of technical expertise, are all factors affecting your decision on whether to hire a particular TW.

I canvassed a number of technical writing experts to find out which traits they look for in TW candidates. Here are some of their responses:

Yoni Palmer, Software Documentation Team Lead at Brix Software, looks for TWs with a positive attitude and those who are good communicators.

Rachel Karlin, Principal Content Manager at Microsoft, focuses on attention to detail and technical aptitude. She says that there are many other traits, but those are the most crucial.

Gideon Behrensmeyer, Technical Writing Team Lead at Sisense, looks for people who are "trying to improve as technical writers - whether this is in writing skills or on the technical side...When you have someone who doesn't try to improve, it gives the impression that they are there to do their hours and go home, or that this career is just a filler as they couldn't find anything else to do with their Liberal Arts degree."

Gideon is also concerned about TWs with an ego, "This may seem odd but the role of the technical writer is to ask questions to understand technologies from a variety of fields. There is no way we could know it all, so pretending that we do prevents us from actually understanding a feature. Also, the nature of the work is that we work with people who are experts in their technical fields (code) and to act as if we are better or know more than our Subject Matter Expert (SME) can negatively impact our ability to get information from them. I rejected a writer with a coding background because I could see that he had a very large ego and I was concerned that he wouldn't get along with developers, and I was also concerned that his ego wouldn't have been good for a start-up environment where processes are not perfect."

Menahem Rosen, Senior Technical Communicator and Translation Manager (Retired) at Stratasys, says that it depends on the kind of role you want to fill. But here are the general traits you should look for: inquisitive, thorough, accurate, cooperative, and flexible.

Miriam Lottner Senior Program Manager, Content and Learning at Microsoft looks for problem solving abilities and creativity. She says, “In my 25 years in the community, no two TW jobs or environments were ever the same. So, a Senior TW who can't think super creatively and be willing to take risks to solve problems isn’t going to be successful on their own.”

Ezriel Yellin, Senior Technical Writer at Infinidat, also looks for a person who is creative. You’ll see in the interview techniques section that his methods for identifying creative TWs are quite unique.

Paula Stern, Founder and Director at WritePoint, looks for experience and soft-skills. She also says that large companies and small companies look for different traits in a TW. “Larger companies are looking for a team player, someone to fit into the team and perform the tasks assigned to them. The company may already have the tools, the templates, the style guide and more. The company will be very satisfied with a technical writer who has a specific scope of skills and experience. Smaller companies and start-ups are often looking for more. In some ways, they redefine the technical writer as their local “English” expert. The job will include not only interviewing SMEs and writing the documentation, but much more. They want someone who will help them improve and QA the interface (for software). They want someone who can check the error messages and help guide the company’s “written” appearance. They may be asked to write white papers, review blogs, create a Knowledge Base for end-users, and much more.”

Avital Pinnick, Principal Technical Writer at Red Hat, looks for honesty and curiosity in a TW candidate, “Honesty means being able to admit that you do not know something or to admit mistakes. I had a bad experience when a manager hired a co-worker who lied about his qualifications. It was demoralizing for the rest of our team because we had to carry his workload and he had been hired at a higher rank than the rest of the team. Our team never really recovered. I jumped to a different project as soon as I was able to and the other TW went back to her old job. So, I always tell candidates that they have to be honest about what they do or don't know, and to ask questions. If they pretend to know something that they don't, it slows everyone else down.”

Regarding curiosity, Avital says, “I look for candidates who want to learn new things or to learn more about products and methodologies. They have to learn a hell of a lot of stuff just to do their daily work, so if they like learning new things, that makes the process a lot easier...If someone on the team asks me questions that could be Googled, I might deflect the question with, ‘That's an interesting question. What do you think?’”

Yehuda Simon, Senior Manager, Technical Communications and Knowledge Management at Synamedia, says that a good TW candidate will be one who can “describe complex ideas succinctly and clearly, and who has a strong ability to learn new things: technologies, approaches to solving problems, and tools”. Yehuda also says that there are two additional traits he looks for in a TW: outside interests that don’t have to do with technology or writing, as that enriches the way a person looks at the world and approaches challenges and problems, and an excellent interpersonal dynamic (they need to be able to work well with a wide variety of personalities).

Eli Jacobs, CEO and Founder at JBS Outsourced Technical Writing, prefers product-oriented TWs. "Documentation is part of a product. I expect the Senior TW (STW) candidate to be able to analyze strategic product goals and derive an approach to documentation that serves those aims...I like STWs who can put themselves in the shoes of their CEO and constantly ask themselves: Is my documentation contributing to, or hindering my company’s strategic goals?"

Take-aways

When hiring Technical Writers, look for candidates who:

- Have a positive attitude
- Are good communicators
- Have excellent interpersonal skills
- Demonstrate attention to detail
- Have technical aptitude
- Are trying to improve as technical writers
- Desire to learn new things
- Do not have a huge ego
- Are inquisitive, thorough, accurate, cooperative, and flexible
- Have problem solving abilities
- Are creative
- Are experienced
- Have a good grasp of soft-skills
- Are team players
- Are honest
- Have outside interests
- Are product and business-oriented

Chapter 3: The Position Description

As with all open jobs in any industry, it's important to write a comprehensive position description for the technical writing job you're hiring for. The Position Description serves two purposes: it gives you a clearer idea of the type of TW you want to hire so you can define the skills they need, and it lets TW candidates self-select (either in or out, depending on whether the description appeals to them or not). Here are some things to consider when composing your position description for a TW:

- **Number of years of experience required**: This can also be an indication of the level of writer you're looking for and it hints to the pay grade. Here's a rough guide:
    - 1-3 years of experience indicates a Junior TW
    - 3-5 years of experience indicates a mid-level TW
    - 5+ years of experience indicates a Senior TW

  The number of years of experience required must be commensurate with the rest of the requirements. You can't expect a person with minimal experience to have the responsibilities or skills of a high-level TW.

  As far as I can tell, there are no standards for TW titles. This means that, for example, writing "Senior Technical Writer" on the position description doesn't give a clear indication of required years of experience. Also, TWs express their titles in many (and sometimes creative) ways: Technical Writer, Technical Communicator, Information Specialist, Content Writer, Knowledge Manager, and so on.

- **Domain experience** (cyber, data, telco, networking, etc.): This might or might not be important to you. If your company is in a specialized field (for example, quantum computing), you might want someone who has a background in that technology. Conversely, you might realize that it would be too difficult to find a TW with that kind of experience. Consider not requiring it and, instead, include domain experience as a "nice to have".

Sometimes, it's perfectly fine to hire a TW with experience in documenting cybersecurity products for a position where they'll be documenting telco products - people do learn and TWs who love to learn are the best kind. **Gideon Behrensmeyer**, Technical Writing Team Lead at Sisense says, "I look for people who are trying to improve as technical writers. How do you test this? Well, learners are people who are continuously taking courses or following the latest trends by listening to podcasts or reading blogs."

- **Domain-specific terms and acronyms**: Include domain-specific terms and acronyms in your position description without defining them. A TW who isn't familiar with those terms or who doesn't bother to look them up will self-select themselves out of the running.
- **Types of docs the writer will be expected to write**: This is very important. It helps to let the TW know what type of person you are looking for: a Non-technical Technical Writer, or a Technical-Technical Writer.
- **Part of a team, lone writer, first TW for the position**: This can be an indication of the calibre of TW you're looking for. If the TW is the first one hired in your company, they'll be responsible for setting up systems and processes as well as actually writing the docs. Some TWs would love that kind of challenge, others run as fast as they can in the opposite direction. This doesn't mean that a TW who's part of a team is less skilled, but it's good for candidates to know the kind of environment they'll be joining.
- **Languages necessary for writing and communicating**: If your company is an international one, or writes documents for international audiences, it's important to list the level of expertise in the required languages for writing docs and interfacing with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).
- **Tools used**: This is a touchy subject because, on one hand, you want to hire a person who can slip into the position easily and not have to spend time learning new tools. But on the other hand, while some tools are more complex than others, a smart TW will learn most tools easily enough. Based on my own experience, I'm of the second opinion. It took me only two weeks or so until I was perfectly comfortable using FrameMaker in a new job, having never used it before. **Yehuda Simon**, Senior Manager, Technical Communications and Knowledge Management at Synamedia, says his pet peeve is requiring a minimum number of years of experience with a specific tool, "That is really thinking small. I'd much rather hire someone who can learn tools quickly than someone who is currently an expert in one tool that might end up becoming irrelevant or obsolete in a year or two."

I suggest listing the tools you use under “nice to have" without a minimum number of years experience attached to it. This will attract people who are familiar with those tools and those keen to learn something new. It will scare the others away.

- **Basic TW requirements**: Don’t include the requirement “needs to be a strong communicator” and “needs to be able to interact with SMEs”. So many position descriptions list these as requirements and it’s so wrong. Why don’t they also demand that you ”must be a good speller”? If a person considers themselves a TW but can’t communicate or interact with SMEs, they need to go home and rethink their career choices. **Benjamin Figdor**, Global Talent Sourcer at AppsFlyer, concurs in part, but also adds, “I agree that including good communication skills isn't necessary for the requirements section, but under the role description it's important to emphasise communication and which stakeholders they'll be working with.”

Take-aways

- Write a comprehensive position description because it will help you clarify for yourself the type of TW you need to hire
- Comprehensive position descriptions help candidates know what you require so they can self-select in or out
- Consider including experience requirements, domain terms, types of docs they'd be writing, and required languages
- List the tools you use in the “nice to have” section without a minimum number of years experience attached to it
- Don’t include requirements that are basic TW skills

Chapter 4: Reviewing CVs

Your position description was successfully advertised and CVs are pouring in. How do you know if an applicant is worth an interview or not? The CV is usually the first piece of writing a TW will submit to you. The CV should be the candidate's finest document because it indicates how much they value accuracy, and so it must be flawless.

Here are a few things that you should look for when reviewing Technical Writer CVs:

- **No typos**: Any typos in a CV should be an automatic disqualifier. A TW who is trying to convince you of their skills as a writer should not, under any circumstances, allow for a typo to leak into their CV.
- **Logical layout**: Information flow is a key component of good writing. The information presented in the CV must be written with logical information flow in mind.
- **Consistency**: When reviewing a CV, check that the terminology as well as the formatting are consistent. Consistency is king. For example, if the years of experience in the CV are inside parentheses for one item, they should be inside parentheses for all items.
- **Meets your core criteria**: Be firm in your commitment to hire a TW who can fulfil your specific core criteria. Be aware of the tendency to be bamboozled by a candidate who has vast expertise in one key area, but little in another. For example, a candidate with 15 years of experience documenting semiconductor technology might know a lot about chip architecture, but those 15 years might not be relevant if you need someone who can write use cases with their eyes closed for a SaaS application.
- **Clear writing**: If a TW candidate's CV contains ambiguous content (like overlapping dates which don't make sense), it's a mistake. You shouldn't have to work hard to understand the person's work and education history. Ambiguity in a CV is a red flag signalling that the TW might not be careful in their work.
- **Personalised CVs**: TWs should never submit generic CVs, nor ones that ignore the specific requirements of a job description. For instance, if your job description requires that the person has experience documenting SDKs, that item should be clearly listed in the CV, and preferably front and center, not buried somewhere at the bottom of a bulleted list.

From his experience reviewing CVs, **Aryeh Sonnenberg**, Senior Technical Writer at IntSights, agrees, "If a CV was not laid out properly, had spelling errors, or used poor language, that applicant was pretty much guaranteed not to get an interview. Unfortunately, these were not rare occurrences."

Avital Pinnick, Principal Technical Writer at Red Hat, adds the following things to look for on the CV, “If someone changes jobs every few months, moving laterally rather than upwards, or if someone has spent several decades working for outsourcing companies, that can be a sign of problems. On the other hand, if someone has worked at only one company for 25 years, that can also be problematic. None of these conditions is an actual black mark, just a red flag to look more closely at the candidate's background.”

Take-aways

- A TW’s CV is their finest document and should be flawless
- Look for typos, ambiguity, and generic CVs
- Is the CV written with information flow in mind?
- Does the candidate display consistency of language?
- Are the candidate’s skills in line with your core criteria?
- Don’t disqualify a candidate, but raise a red flag if you find signs of job-hopping, too many years as an outsourcer, or “company career” employees

Chapter 5: Reviewing Samples

It's important to get an idea of a Technical Writing candidate's abilities before calling them in for an interview. You can also request writing samples to be brought in at the interview stage, but seeing them beforehand helps you select the TWs you're most interested in interviewing and will save you time.

The writing samples TWs send you are not necessarily going to be in the field you're recruiting for. In fact, quite often, TWs can't provide "real" writing samples because of NDAs and other such agreements with current and past employers. You shouldn't expect them to provide "real" documents. Samples can be as mundane as how to use a feature of their favorite software, or as whimsical as how to disassemble a toaster. But whether or not it's a "real" document, writing samples should showcase the TW's skills and represent their absolute best work.

Review the writing samples as if they were work the TW would do for you. After all, that's really the point of the exercise. Consider the following:

- **Style**: Is the writing written in a reasonable style for the type of document it is. The writing sample is almost never going to comply with your style guide, so don't be put off by it. If your company publishes their style guide on the open Internet (for example, if you work for Microsoft or the University of Chicago), give extra points for documents that are written to comply with your company's style requirements.
- **Clear and precise writing**: The writing sample is likely to be for a product you're not familiar with. This is not a disadvantage because you get to read the document as if you're the user. If after reading it you can understand what the product does, why you need it, and how to use it (or at least part of it), that's a good sign. If the document is riddled with ambiguities, inconsistent terminology, or confusing sentence structure, you'll need to think twice about passing the applicant on to the next stage.
- **Logical information flow**: Pay attention to the way the document presents the information. Are the sections in the correct order - and are they all there?
- **Typos**: Any typos in a writing sample should condemn the TW's application to the bin of ultimate rejection. There's no excuse for submitting a writing sample with even one typo. This applies to applicants for junior-level TW positions and certainly to senior-level ones.

- **Proper use of screenshots or images**: Most user documentation requires just the right number of screenshots. What that means depends on the product, the audience, and the type of document. Too many screenshots could overwhelm the user; too few screenshots could cause the user to get lost. Photos of hardware parts are also important, especially for installation, configuration, and maintenance guides. Images need to be sharp and clear. Sometimes lighting and angles can make this challenging and a good TW will ensure that only helpful photos appear in their documentation.

A candidate's writing samples - like their CVs - are often written and rewritten for the purpose of interviews. **Billy Cina**, Managing Partner of Marketing Envy, reviews many writing samples from marketing writers, where similar principles to technical writing apply. Billy argues that writing samples provided to you by the candidate are not necessarily indicative of their abilities, "Unfortunately many writers submit samples that have been through infinite rounds with the client. So, in my opinion...getting down to writing a sample piece [provided as a test] is the quickest way to evaluate."

We'll talk about writing tests in the next chapter.

Take-aways

- Writing samples enable you to get an idea of a Technical Writing candidate's abilities before an interview
- Often, TWs can't provide "real" writing samples because of NDAs and other such agreements
- Writing samples should showcase the TW's skills and represent their absolute best work
- Review the writing samples as if they were work the TW would do for you
- Check the writing samples for style, clarity and accuracy, logical information flow, typos, and proper use of screenshots or images
- Writing samples might have gone through several iterations with the client and so are not necessarily indicative of the candidate's skills

Chapter 6: The Interview Process

You now have a short-list of candidates who passed the initial review process and are ready to be funnelled into the interview stage. Personally, I enjoy this part, but others feel a certain level of anxiety because this is where you communicate directly with TW candidates - it gets real! This chapter discusses:

The Phone Interview

The phone interview is an initial screening call. It's very important for determining how the candidates communicate and to get an idea of their interpersonal skills. You also want to become acquainted with them a little to see if they sound like someone you can share an office with, go to lunch with, or just talk about work with. Do they have interesting ideas? Are they thinkers? Of course, you can't get all of that from one phone call, but you can get an idea of whether they seem like they can hold their own in an intelligent conversation or not.

Shibby Sadot, Head of People at CyberMDX, asks, "So what is happening behind the scenes of this initial conversation? For HR it's getting a glimpse into the candidate's personality. Are they communicative? Do they possess people skills? Do they fit the organisation's culture?

It's also understanding the candidate's professional fit. Are their experience and background relevant? Are they overqualified or under-qualified for the role? What are the candidate's motivations? Are they really interested in the job or just shopping around?"

Speak as little as possible and pay just as much attention to what the candidate is saying as to how they say it. Weight the equation so that they talk more and you listen more. Although do keep in mind that both parties are expected to contribute to the conversation.

Start off by introducing yourself and your role in the company (keep it very brief) and give a short overview of the job. Then ask some open-ended questions which you can turn into a conversation. Here are a few examples:

- **Tell me a little bit about yourself**

  This classic question is meant to be both an ice-breaker and a way for you to see if the candidate can filter out irrelevant details and summarize the salient points. They know their story, and it's probably long and exciting - for them. But they also know (or should know) that what you need is a three-minute introduction to their background and nothing more. You can pick up on something interesting about one of their former jobs and take the conversation from there.

- **What part of the job description was most exciting for you?**

  Answering this question probably requires a little thought. It's a good sign when a candidate says, "Interesting question. Let me think about it for a moment" and then takes a moment to formulate their thoughts. TWs who take the time to think are usually the ones who do best. Keep in mind that applicants often apply for many positions and it might not be easy for them to remember all of the job requirements for your specific job. However, a person who really wants to work with you will make sure to review the job description before the phone interview.

- **Tell me a little about your experience working in X company**

  This question will help you figure out what the candidate considers to be important points about a former job. How they speak about their previous experiences is important. Do they go on and on about bad experiences? Do they badmouth previous workplaces? Do they have little insight into the product or company and so have nothing substantial to say about it?

According to **Shibby Sadot** - as general guidelines - here are some things to look for during the conversation:

- Is the candidate nice? This conversation should be a pleasant one. You're interested in hiring nice people, not just professional people. Is the candidate "smiling over the phone"?
- Chemistry eats everything for breakfast. Did you connect with the candidate on a personal level?
- Did the candidate share something personal about themselves?
- Does the candidate have a positive attitude and open mindset?
- Is the candidate curious to learn about the organization and the role?

- Did the candidate interrupt, rush in, or listen carefully?
- Were the candidate's answers concise, accurate, and truthful?
- Candidates should not be asking about the compensation package at this stage. If they do, they're rushing to third base.

If you've conducted the phone interview successfully, you had a good conversation and learned a little bit about the candidate, and them about you. They've asked one or two insightful questions, or expressed intelligent opinions. Of course, as fun as it is to talk tech and technical writing with a like-minded person, phone interviews should not go for hours.

Shibby Sadot says, "30 minutes or less. That's about how long it takes you to make pasta and sauce. That's also how long it takes a candidate to pass a phone interview and change their life...The phone interview may appear as a short, simple conversation. Half an hour of basic information swap. But this is misleading. This is the interview that determines whether the candidate will be moving forward to the next stage or the interviewer will just politely say goodnight."

At this stage, you're not evaluating if the candidate is a good fit for your company. That comes later. You're checking out their communication skills and getting to know them a bit. You want to know if it's worth your time to go to the next step.

If, after the conversation you have a positive feeling about the candidate, let them know what the rest of the hiring process is going to be. This is important because it gives the candidate an idea of what's expected of them. As in most cases, when expectations are aligned, good things can happen.

Take-aways

- The purpose of the phone interview is to get an idea of the candidate's communication skills, personality, and professional fit
- Encourage the candidate do most of the talking
- Ask open-ended questions to get a conversation going
- Determine if the candidate is nice, that you connect with them on a personal level, that they have a positive attitude, that they are curious, and so on
- The phone interview should last no more than 30 minutes
- If the conversation was successful, let the candidate know of the next steps

The Writing Test

Writing tests are a standard part of hiring for all levels of technical writers. The type of writing test you set depends on whether the candidate is being assessed at home or in your office at an interview. The type of TW you're hiring is also a significant factor in what the test includes and how long it should take.

The purpose of writing tests is to validate the TW's ability to perform the type of work that they would be expected to do in their job. So, give them a test that resembles their daily work. It's no use if you give them a test that doesn't showcase their skills in the type of work you're going to assign them. It's also imperative that you don't get them to do free work for you. Not only is it bad practice to get someone who doesn't understand your product to write your docs for you, but it's also very unethical.

The test could be related to an old feature or product that is no longer in use or that was never (and will never be) released. It's especially good if there's no documentation available for it online.

Billy Cina, Managing Partner of Marketing Envy, gives candidates a real marketing writing assignment (blog, ebook, white paper, etc.) If all of the criteria for the job are met, she will jump straight to a real-world writing assignment that is not time sensitive. She pays the candidate the full rate for it because she wants to receive a full service.

As a Documentation Manager, I reviewed many writing tests. On more than one occasion, I noticed that the candidates submitted excellent tests. So excellent that I felt compelled to Google some of the best worded phrases. As you might guess, while those candidates had good Internet search skills, they weren't smart enough to cheat properly and so I didn't go forward with their application.

Set reasonable time limits for completing the test. If the test is given during the in-person interview, an hour or so should be sufficient. If the test is done at home, it can be longer, say, three hours. But of course, especially if you give a deadline of a week, you can't really know if they spent three hours or three days on it.

Here are some suggestions for writing tests:

- Describe a specific UI
- Write a Quick Start Guide for a product
- Explain a commonly known process (e.g., how to share a document in Google Drive)
- Edit a technical document for clarity, typos, errors, ambiguity, inconsistency
- Explain a JSON response to an API in the format that developers require
- Write a procedure based on a requirements document (a real one from a non-documented feature is best)

I once took a very interesting test as a TW candidate. The interviewer showed me a list of sentences which were full of jargon and were very badly written to the point they were almost incomprehensible. My assignment was to rewrite each of the sentences properly. The genius of this test was that I had to ask the interviewer questions (as if she was the SME) to figure out what these sentences meant and demonstrate my thought process so I could rewrite them properly.

Ezriel Yellin, Senior Technical Writer at Infinidat, takes the following creative approach, “I have some off-the-wall tests for potential hires. I have a list of different standard actions that most people can perform automatically. I ask people to write a procedure to perform the task. Some of these tasks include making a peanut butter and jam sandwich, making a cheese and tomato sandwich, turning on a computer and saving a newly created Word document, and so on. In some cases, I ask them to write a short User Guide designed for aliens, teaching them to make an egg. The reason behind these tests is to show how they can write a simple procedure. I've used this for both graduates of technical writing classes and for people who have never done something like this before. I had one candidate (a woman re-entering the workforce) write an excellent procedure on how to fry an egg, while a lawyer provided me with a wall of text for the same request.”

There are certain things that you should look for when reviewing the test assignment. **Avital Pinnick**, Principal Technical Writer at Red Hat, lists the following:

- **Basic writing ability**: Grammar, punctuation, active voice, organization of material, understanding of TW conventions
- **Punctuality**: If a test is submitted late, with no warning or explanation, that is not a good sign.
- **Research skills**: Can they find material that may be scattered in different places?
- **Comprehension**: Do they understand what the product is supposed to do? Do they know what a Quick Start Guide is supposed to look like? If someone pastes the original commands with no explanation and claims to know Linux, that may indicate that they do not know Linux. A couple of candidates produced a procedure that was a list of links to the original upstream documentation on the product website! Apart from the fact that the links could change at any time, no customer wants to click their way through pages of barely edited content to install software.

Take-aways

- The point of the writing test is to validate the TW's ability to do the job they are applying for
- The test should be reflective of the work the TW will do on a daily basis
- Don't get the candidate to do free work for you
- The test should be related to an old feature or one that won't be released and for which there is no publicly available information
- Beware of cheaters who plagiarize from the Internet
- At-home tests should take no more than three hours; tests given at the interview should take no more than one hour
- There are a range of indicators to look for in test submissions, including: that candidates can do the basic task, have basic writing ability, are punctual, can research properly, and understand the technology

The In-person Technical Interview

There are volumes of information about the best way to interview job candidates. The same general rules that apply to most technical jobs also apply to interviewing Technical Writers. After all, TWs need to have a certain level of product understanding and therefore display the required amount of technical knowledge for the position they are filling.

Avital Pinnick, Principal Technical Writer at Red Hat, has the following philosophy, “If a writer says that they have knowledge of an area that I am familiar with, I might ask a semi-tech question like, "I see that you are familiar with Linux. Could you give me an example of a command?" or "You have been working for this cybersecurity company for three years. Could you tell me about one of your company's products? What risks does it mitigate? How does it work?" If I get an unsatisfactory answer, that's not a positive sign. In my books, it is absolutely fine if someone does not know something, as long as they admit that they have this gap in their knowledge and are willing to fill it in.”

Interviewing trends for technical positions in high-tech companies have evolved over the years. It used to be common to ask a candidate how many windows there are in New York City, or why manhole covers are round. Nowadays, most of those types of “thinking out of the box” questions have been replaced with more practical ones. The trend is also to view the technical interview as less of an oral exam but as more of a conversation where the candidate reveals the information the interviewer needs to know to make a decision.

I asked a number of technical writing experts for interview techniques when hiring a TW. Here are some of their responses:

Eli Jacobs, CEO and Founder at JBS Outsourced Technical Writing, says "I like to show a candidate a heavy, messy “before” document - for example, a 100-page Admin Guide written by engineers. I give them 10-15 minutes to look it over and prepare their thoughts about the big picture.

- What are the overarching changes you would propose?
- Does the structure work? If not, what would you change?
- Can you figure out the reader’s persona and assumed level of knowledge? Are these consistent throughout?

- Does all the content in this document belong here or should some of it be moved to other documents (for example, removing Installation details from an Operator's Guide)?
- And then of course, what do they see regarding the more plain-vanilla tech-writing issues: consistency of terms, use of images, formulating procedures, writing style and so on."

Rachel Karlin, Principal Content Manager at Microsoft has a similar approach. "I try to engage them in discussion about the field and the things they appreciate about it and the things they find frustrating and I ask them to analyze our documentation to see what they look for and how they'd improve things."

Paula Stern, Founder and Director, WritePoint says, "If I see that the person is likely to be someone who has a larger picture of documentation and service to their employers, I am likely to start a discussion about this and quickly see whether the writer agrees and has similar feelings or is reluctant or unwilling to offer these services. If they feel that the company should pay more for these skills, I'm less likely to recommend them or hire them for such a job. I will often ask scenario questions to judge how a writer feels about a situation and how they would handle it. This can tell me a lot about the person and their work ethic and is often easier than direct questions about experience."

On the other hand, **Yoni Palmer**, Software Documentation Team Lead at Brix Software, likes to shine a light on the candidate's experience. "I mainly try to ascertain that their experience is in fact real and ask them to describe some of what they've done and the processes they used."

Ezriel Yellin, Senior Technical Writer at Infinidat, has a unique approach, "The main trait I've looked for in the past is curiosity. I would put some mundane object on the table, and ask the candidate to describe all of its possible uses, so that I can see how they think outside of the box. For example, I once pulled a CD off my desk, and asked the candidate to list all the things that could be done with it. Aside from the popular uses, saving data, playing music, one candidate looked at it, turned it over a couple of times, then said that it could also be used as a signaling device for hikers who are lost. I also ask them about their non-technical reading and writing habits. Someone who reads and writes outside their professional requirements is someone who has the potential to be a better writer."

Menahem Rosen, Senior Technical Communicator and Translation Manager (Retired) at Stratasys, conducts a discussion about what was challenging for the candidate in past TW projects. He finds out the types of documentation that the candidate enjoys or dislikes and asks how the candidate sees their career development as a Technical Writer. He also asks if there's a new type of project or application that the candidate might like to be involved in.

Miriam Lottner, Senior Program Manager, Content and Learning at Microsoft, focuses on the candidate's ability to interface with SMEs of all types, draw critical information out and then explain it to someone else. "So that is the key for me. I design my interviews process to ensure I can determine a candidate's ability and skills at that process. All the rest are semantics in my opinion".

Take-aways

- The same general rules for interviewing for most technical jobs also apply to hiring TWs
- Ask questions that test that the candidate has the knowledge they claim to have
- Have a conversation with the candidate to reveal information you want to know
- Ask the candidate to review a complex document and suggest improvements
- Engage the candidate in a discussion about your field of technology
- Ask scenario questions
- Ask about their experience to find out what they've done and the processes they used
- Test curiosity by asking the candidate to think of alternate uses for a common object
- Find out about the candidate's non-technical writing habits
- Ask the candidate about the types of documentation they most enjoy writing
- Determine the candidate's ability to interface with SMEs

Conclusion

Your goal is to identify the right Technical Writer with the most appropriate skills for the job. While it's true that hiring a TW is a similar process to hiring other technical staff, TWs really are a breed of their own and require specific strategies for finding the best ones.

Keep in mind these steps:

1. Decide what kind of TW you need.
2. Define the TW role in a comprehensive position description.
3. Review candidate CVs with a fine-tooth comb.
4. Review writing samples with your goals in mind.
5. Conduct a phone interview to get a glimpse of each candidate's communication skills and personality.
6. Devise a well thought out writing test and carefully analyze the submissions.
7. Interview candidates by having a conversation that uncovers the traits you most require, and that reveals their true skill level.

The best practices outlined in the chapters above should help you to reduce the risks and to streamline the TW hiring process. I hope that the collective wisdom of the technical writing, marketing, and HR thought leaders in this ebook will give you the tools you need to succeed in hiring your next Technical Writer.

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