

## Interviewing new candidates

(Posted to the list on August 1, 2000)

I'm going to be interviewing new candidates for a position on my team of technical communicators. I'm looking for a technical communication specialist and it's my first time to interview so I want to make sure I ask good questions that will reveal the most about a candidate and their thought processes. What open ended questions have you asked during interviews that have provided you with the best feed back from a candidate?

Also, I have a top ten list of traits I'm looking for in a candidate, but I want to make sure that I'm covering all my bases. What traits do you look for in a candidate? How do you keep from hiring a carbon copy of yourself without hiring someone so different in viewpoints that both of you will be miserable?

Thanks in advance for your help.

Connie

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Connie,

If anything, I have noted that the single best thing you can do to prepare for an interview is to, well, prepare! :)

Seriously, become familiar with their resume and their writing samples. One thing that I demand when I am interviewing is that the candidates send me their samples before we meet. Why? So I can take my time and give their samples the time and attention that they deserve. If I try to review samples during the interview, I find it very uncomfortable. The candidate is sitting there, looking around, waiting while you read, looking for any reaction to the document. Ick.

More importantly, if you have reviewed the writing sample, you have that great question/request at your disposal at all times: "Please tell me about this document; your role, how you gathered the information, any roadblocks, if you could have done anything differently what would it have been, etc." If you're familiar with the writing sample, you can even ask more in depth questions about how they put it together (ask them about style choices and word choices). Talk about revealing answers!

Oh, and watch "Law & Order" a whole bunch. Learn how to cross-exam and dig deep for those answers. You said it yourself: open ended questions are the best.

And I like to stay away from stock questions. IMHO, stock questions = stock answers.

Just my quick insight,  
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Here are some of my favorite questions and my rationale. (I never ask anyone all of these.) Most questions can be easily modified for those with limited work experience.

--How would your co-workers from your previous position describe you professionally?  
I want people who have thought about what their co-workers think about them.

--What do you expect from your manager?  
Gives insight into whether they prefer a hands-on or hands-off manager. I can handle either, but if I hire too many that need me to be hands-on....

--Tell me about a disagreement you had at work and how the disagreement was resolved.  
I don't want people who've never had a disagreement.

--Describe your professional passion.  
Don't have one, I don't want work with you.

--Describe one of your most successful job accomplishments.  
Some ego is necessary. Helps illustrate what is important to this person. Was it being on time? Was it that the customer complimented the deliverable? Was it being part of a team? It's not a good thing if they've never felt successful.

--Describe a project you worked on that wasn't going well and what you did about it or learned from it.  
Tells how they work with others. If they say they've never worked on a project that wasn't going well, I don't want them. Can they learn from past experience?

--Tell me about the least favorite co-worker you've ever worked with.  
Gives insight into personality. What's a "problem" to them? Is it lack of cooperation? Is it back stabbing? Can reveal prejudices you just don't need.

--If I gave you an assignment you didn't agree with, what would you do?  
See if they will do what you need, which is, protect you from stupid decisions or at least make you think about them! I want someone who will give me information that may make me reconsider my decision but who knows when to let go.

--Tell me about a time on the job when you felt you got "out voted" on an issue and the impact this had on you.  
Can they pick their spots? Can they fight in a positive way for something that is important to the company? Are they always "out voted"?

\*\*\*Aren't you glad I never interviewed you?\*\*\*

regards,  
doreen

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These are the questions I used during technical interviews (light on team-working stuff) for a team leader at a previous employer.

## **General Technical Writing**

What is the purpose of technical writing?

To transfer knowledge about a product or service to the people who need it.

Why are you a technical writer?

No "right" answer.

What is your favourite aspect of technical writing?

No "right" answer.

What is your least favourite aspect of technical writing?

No "right" answer.

What is the optimal technical writing team size?

No "right" answer. Trick question, there is no optimal size.

How many people should work on one deliverable?

No "right" answer. Trick question, answer is "it depends."

Describe the three major types of information that tech writers deal with.

Conceptual, Procedural, Reference (or reasonable facsimile)

What is "task based" writing?

Writing organized based on user task with primary focus on helping the user achieve that task.

What is "reference" writing?

Writing organized based on product function with primary focus on providing complete product information to the reader.

When would you use online help and when would you use a paper manual?

Many possible answers.

- based on user preference
- based on task (reference online help, conceptual paper, learning either)
- based on product (software vs. hardware)

Explain what Single Sourcing is.

The provision of information "chunks" from a single database to populate multiple deliverables (online help, manuals, web, etc.)

Explain what Information Design is and how it relates to technical writing.

Describe how you would ensure that your deliverables are easily translatable.

- Use consistent language, words, phrases
- Keep text out of graphics
- Avoid cultural references

Explain one conceptual tool of technical writing, what it is, why and when you would use it, and its effect on the reader.

Sign posting, task-based procedures, information mapping, etc.

## **Professional Awareness**

What is the STC?

Society of Technical Communicators – group that serves the community.

Name one other group or subgroup devoted to technical writing.

IEEE SIGdoc

Where do you look for grammar questions?

- editor friend
- dictionary.com
- other web site
- book references

Where do you get your management tips from?

- STC
- Website
- Contacts in the industry
- books

## **Writing and Publishing Tools and Technologies**

Explain three ways of importing graphics into MS Word. What are the benefits and weaknesses of each?

What is your favourite graphic format for printed manuals?

EPS should be the best format. Other formats with compelling reasons are ok too.

What is your favourite graphic format for online information?

Should vary by information type (HTML vs. Winhelp). Bitmap / Gif / JPEG.

Bonus points: what does Gif and JPEG stand for? Graphics Interchange Format. Joint Photograph Experts Group.

Explain the differences between Winhelp and HTML help.

Winhelp – easy searching, ubiquitous, poor formatting

HTML Help – easy integration with Web, use of low-bandwidth web formats, better formatting with HTML (esp. tables).

Explain the difference between MS Word and Adobe FrameMaker

Word is writing tool with publishing capabilities while FrameMaker is a publishing tool with writing capabilities. This means that they have different strengths and weaknesses.

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I've used a phone-screening process to cherry-pick the best candidates. The phone screen consists of 10 to 15 open-ended questions, and based on the results (and a certain level of intuition), the candidate either makes the short list for interviews or we pass.

I think it's important to make it expressly clear what the expectations and duties of the position will be. For example, my present employer uses web designers and web developers to do all the eCommerce web sites for our customers. Some technical writer candidates had a lot of HTML experience and I naturally assumed they would probably like to continue that. During the phone screen, I would tell them that there would be little opportunity to use their HTML skills and ask them if that would be a problem for them. It's best to get to the heart of career expectations as early as possible in the interview process to save you and the candidates time and energy. As my friend Dan pointed out, preparing for an interview can consume a lot of your productive time, and when you have several interviews scheduled throughout the day (and over several days), it can be quite tiresome.

One other thing we did was place almost as much emphasis on the candidate being a good culture fit as we did on their technical/people skills. If you have a collaborative work environment, you obviously don't want to hire someone who has all the technical skills but prefers to work alone. The laid-back culture of our Austin office (totally casual dress, various hair colors and styles, various body piercings, etc.) was 180 degrees opposite that of the Dallas HQ culture, which was very straight-laced, conservative dress, jeans on Friday only. In fact, if you were caught wearing a suit in the Austin office, everyone just assumed all your t-shirts and jeans were in the wash. In Dallas, if you came in with a t-shirt and jeans, everyone assumed all your suits were at the dry cleaners. But culture fit is really an important factor you shouldn't ignore as it can make or break a team.

Good luck,  
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Technical Communications Ronin

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1. Tell me about a piece of software for which you wrote documentation. (If the candidate can't describe the software, I'm not sanguine that they'll do a good job on our software.)
2. The PDFs are at the printer and you notice a typo. What do you do? (Delay the deliverable is the wrong answer. Perfectionists won't last in our environment.)
3. Same situation and you notice a technical error. What do you do? (Raise it to management. Use the readme/release notes. Anything like this would be appropriate.)
4. What's the best thing you've ever done? (I'm interested to see if anyone's ever going to say something non-work related.)
5. Tell me about something you totally messed up. (Could be revealing.)

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The Tech Writer list (TECHWR-L) covered much the same territory about a month ago. If you'd like to see both questions to ask interviewees and questions to ask interviewers, check out the

list archives at: <http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/>. Anyone can search the archives, but you have to be a list member to post.

Happy searching!

Marguerite  
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Lots of good suggestions so far. Here's an approach that has produced some good results for me.

I talk about our company, our organization, the development and writing teams, and the products, leaving plenty of open spaces for the candidate to jump in with questions, comments, or acknowledgements. I'm most interested in what excites and intrigues them.

Karl  
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