

## TECHNICAL WRITING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA, WHERE IS IT?

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In B.C., technical writing is a good career choice for a university graduate who has a solid background in English or Communications as well as some interest and experience in a technology. Salary alone provides eloquent proof. B.C. Hydro pays its simplest "staff writer" (with high school graduation and some journalism training) in the Public Affairs Division \$24,000 yearly, but a technical writer in the Engineering Division \$36,000.

Paradoxically, technical writing is not very visible as a job offering because it is a new field in the West. B.C. companies rarely use the phrase "technical writer", the American term describing the occupation. For example, if you were to glance through the position announcements in a data processing trade newspaper such as Computerworld, there would be an ad or two for a "technical writer," but in the classified section of the Vancouver Sun you would likely see the job titles:

- Documentation Analyst
- Documentation Specialist
- Systems Analyst
- Standards Analyst
- Computer Development Specialist
- Methods and Procedures Analyst

All these came from ads placed by both the public and private sectors of industry: the Public Service Commission, a documentation management company, a crown corporation, a credit union and a distribution company.

It is important to note that the job titles are confusing because they don't differentiate between the technical writer and the

technical doer. For instance, does a "Documentation Analyst" sit at a video display terminal synthesizing computer programs, or is he a writer specializing in making manuals that instruct people how to use a VDT? To find out, anyone hoping to break into the field must look beyond the job title and concentrate on the abilities, qualifications and duties included in the ad.

The job description thus becomes the key to determining if the job can be identified as one involving technical writing or technical doing. Look for the following requirements; if these are emphasized, more than likely the ad seeks a technical writer:

- ability to communicate, both verbally and in writing
- familiarity with/background in . . . (some technical specialty, usually related to data processing or engineering)
- ability to write, proof-read and edit assigned documentation
- ability to apply research skills

The process of discovering a job in technical writing is therefore difficult. But as more B.C. employers become aware that a solution to one of their major problems - the unwillingness or inability of their technical people to write well - is the hiring of qualified, trained writers, the demand and thus the direct advertising will increase.

Diane Gardiner graduated from U.B.C. with a major in English and is now a technical writer at B.C. Hydro.



