Turn your writing skills into a profitable, money-making profession.

Write Your Way to Riches: How to Make Money as a Technical Writer

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Branch Out into Other Areas of Information Design and Make More Money

As you become more experienced as a technical writer, you'll notice that you need to do more than writing to stay employable and make more money.

If you want to become successful, you have to branch out into other areas of information design. But don't worry, a lot of these areas are extensions of technical writing, and are therefore easy to pick up. It's just a matter of learning the skills.

Some areas you should consider include:

- Online help
- Web design
- Graphical User Interface (GUI) design
- Marketing
- Software testing
- Programming
- Multimedia
- Book writing
- Teaching

Design Online Help Systems

Online help is an electronic form of documentation that is incorporated into a software application or stands alone as a separate application.

Online help shows people how to learn and use a product, much like hard-copy documentation does.

Online help presents more issues than hard-copy documentation because information is being presented on screen. Users don't like to read a lot of text on screen, and they need to be able to navigate to different areas of the help document. So, while it's easy to learn online help, it takes a while to master it.

How do you learn online help? There are a few ways:

- Learn it on the job. Most companies today develop online help systems, so they usually have an online help software package already picked out. If you don't know the package, you can take the tutorial and learn most of the features in about an hour.

- Buy books on designing help. Surprisingly, there are no books on the individual help packages, such as RoboHelp, HelpBreeze, and Doc-to-Help. There are, however, books on designing usable help systems. The best one is [Designing Windows 95 Help](#) by Mary Deaton and Cheryl Lockett Zuback. Buy it at your favorite bookstore.

- Go to a seminar. Many training companies offer classes in designing online help. These seminars are expensive (usually several hundred dollars), so try to get your employer to pay for you. If you're a contractor, learn the packages yourself; otherwise, you'll be shelling out big bucks (though you can deduct the classes on your taxes as an education expense). Contact the following companies:

Pubsnet Training	http://www.pubsnet.com
WinWriters	http://www.winwriters.com

Design Web Pages

More and more companies are designing Internet or intranet sites. An Internet site is available to the world. An intranet site is available to people within the company. Outsiders cannot access it.

Designing Web pages is like an extension of designing online help. In fact, more and more companies are moving to HTML help-based systems. HTML is the underlying language of the Web. Browsers read the HTML tags to determine how to present information on screen.

How do you learn to design Web pages? Like online help, there are a few ways:

- Learn it on the job. New versions of Microsoft Word now let you save documents as HTML files. Some companies may also use HTML applications like FrontPage or Dreamweaver.

- Buy books on Web design. Unlike online help, there are tons of books on Web design and software. Go to the bookstore and buy books on Dreamweaver or FrontPage. You may also want to buy books on HTML, XHTML, XML, JavaScript, Java, Perl, CGI. The last four are programming languages that enable you to make interactive Web pages. Perl and CGI let you make pages that write user input to a server which you can access. This is how companies enable people to order products on the Web. *Appendix D: Finding Information Resources Needed by Technical Writers* contains some Internet books.

- Go to a seminar. Many training companies also offer classes in designing Web pages. Again, because these seminars are expensive, try to get your employer to pay for you. If you're a contractor, learn the packages yourself; otherwise, you'll be shelling out big bucks (though you can deduct the classes on your taxes as an education expense). Contact the following company:

Pubsnet Training	http://www.pubsnet.com

- Contact local colleges and universities. Call them and ask for a course catalog. See if they offer classes in Web design or Web programming.

Learn Interface or Usable Design

As a technical writer, you know how to present information in a clear and precise manner. You also know how to layout a page so that the information is easy to read. Well, you can apply these page-design techniques to the screen and design GUIs. This area of technical writing is often called human interface design (HID).

To learn about interface design, you should get training. Some companies offering training include:

Pubsnet Training	http://www.pubsnet.com
Information Mapping, Inc.	http://www.infomap.com
Seminars in Usable Design	http://www.usabledesign.com

Again, check out colleges and universities in your area. If you live in or near Massachusetts, you may be interested in the Bentley College Information Design Certificate Program.

Learn Marketing Writing

As a technical writer, you have to learn everything about the product you're documenting. You have more knowledge than anyone else on the development team, including the sales and marketing personnel.

You can transfer your writing skills and product knowledge into marketing writing. However, marketing writing is a different animal - it's more flowery than technical writing and you have to know how to motivate people with words.

To learn marketing writing:

- Call your local college or university and see if they offer marketing classes.

- Buy marketing books. Get *Cash Copy* and *Money Making Marketing* buy Dr. Jeffrey Lant. *Appendix D: Finding Information Resources Needed by Technical Writers* lists more information on these books.

Test Software

When you document a software product, you have to use it so you know what you are talking about. As you use the product, you may find bugs, which you should dutifully report to the engineers. In essence, by using the application, you're informally testing it.

Why not branch out and do more formal testing? Some companies have a small and strained Quality Assurance (QA) department; some have none at all. If you offer to test the application, your manager will love you (and should reward you financially as well).

The best way to get experience is on the job. If you can program or read code, you may want to try software testing. I have done testing for four of the contracts I've been on.

On three contracts, I read through C and C++ code and wrote up test cases that covered 80% or more of the code. The testers developed UNIX shell scripts that ran the test cases automatically.

On another contract, I learned QA Partner, which is an automated testing program for GUI applications. It tests the interface and underlying code. With QA Partner, you write scripts using its 4 Test language. You then run the scripts against the interface.

Some of the more popular software testing packages include QA Partner, Silk Test, Rational, and WinRunner.

Learn Programming

For a lot of areas, it helps if you can code or at least read code.

For example, if you want to make interactive Web pages or allow people to order products over the Web, you should learn JavaScript, VBScript, Java, CGI, and Perl.

If you are designing a GUI, why not learn how to write the code underneath the GUI? For example, you can design a window in Visual C++. If you know C++, you can then write the code underneath the window.

Technical writers who can code are a rare breed. If you can code, you can demand more money because you'll be more valuable to the company.

To learn how to code:

- Take a class at a local university or college. Call the school and get its catalog. You'll have the best luck with technical colleges, as they offer the widest range of programming classes.

- Buy books on coding. Bookstores are teeming with computer books. It's not a question of finding a book on a certain programming language, but which book to buy. *Appendix D: Finding Information Resources Needed by Technical Writers* lists some programming books you may be interested in.

- Take a seminar. Some universities offer short, but intensive, courses on computer programming. For example, in my area the Boston University Corporate Education Center offers courses in C, C++, Visual Basic, and Java. You can visit them at http://www.butrain.bu.edu.

Design Multimedia Systems

Multimedia incorporates text, sound, and graphics to create animated applications. Computer games represent the best examples of

multimedia in action. Some companies also make computer-based training applications that teach their employees about particular systems or procedures. Because they're so large, most multimedia applications are distributed on CD-ROM.

You can learn to write scripts for multimedia movies or learn how to make the actual movies. Good software programs to learn include MacroMedia Director and MacroMedia Flash. You can buy them at computer stores or call your local university or college to see if it offers courses in multimedia.

A good multimedia book is [Writing for Multimedia](#) by Timothy Garand.

If you live in or near Massachusetts, you can enroll in the Certificate in Multimedia Applications program at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. For more information visit their Web site at http://www.uml.edu.

Write Computer Books

You spend your days writing computer manuals, so why would you want to write them at night as well? Well, in a word, money.

You can make good money writing computer books; $20,000 a year isn't unheard of. $20,000 may not sound like much, but you have to write most books in a couple of months. Otherwise, they'll become obsolete before they're printed. So, $20,000 for a couple of months work doesn't sound bad.

If you publish a book, you'll also increase your reputation. That may translate into more money for you in your regular job.

If you don't want to write a book, you can write articles for computer magazines. The Intercom, published by the [STC](#), is always looking for writers. You get this magazine free when you become a member of the STC.

Many STC chapters publish their own newsletter. For example, the Boston chapter publishes the <u>Boston Broadside</u>. Its editors are always looking for writers to submit articles. You get this newsletter free when you become a Boston member of the STC.

You can also write articles for mainstream computer magazines. Good sources of these magazines are <u>Writer's Market</u> by Writer's Digest Books and <u>The Writer's Handbook</u> published by The Writer, Inc.

To find computer book publishers, go to the computer book section of your local bookstore. There, you'll see the names of a dozen or so publishers. A lot of them have contact information on the inside cover.

A good book on how to write computer books and articles is <u>Making Money in Technical Writing</u> by Peter Kent. He has written over 30 computer books, so he knows his stuff.

Other prolific writers are Eric and Deborah Ray. They've recently written 1350 pages in three months. And I thought Isaac Asimov pumped the words out. Check out their website at <u>http://www.raycomm.com/main.html</u>.

Teach a Class

If you're a good speaker, you may consider contacting your local community college or university and seeing if you can teach an adult education class.

If you're a technical writing contractor, teaching a class is a great way to promote your business. For both contractors and full-timers, it's a great way to supplement your income. As you become more experienced in teaching, you may consider becoming a trainer at Pubsnet, WinWriters, or at any other training company in your area.

A great book on how to break into this market is <u>Money Talks</u> by Dr. Jeffrey Lant.

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