

How (and Why) This Technical Writer Stays in the Game
Josh Czuba | 10/07/22

Everyone needs technology, but almost nobody really understands how it works. Between the expert engineers who make the magic happen and the end consumer, someone needs to step in and translate the complex scientific language into words that we regular people understand so that we can continue operating our phones, computers, cars, and just about every other daily appliance in our lives with ease.

Philip Hayek, a seasoned technical writer and English professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago does just that. Throughout his career, he has contributed work to academic publications including *Aether: A Journal of Strategic Airpower and Spacepower*, as well as numerous professional conferences within the technical and business writing world.

As a technical writer, Hayek is one of over 45,000 skilled professionals in the USA dedicated to making industry-specific, data-laden and inaccessible information digestible for inexperienced (or lay) readers. This type of writer operates behind the scenes of nearly every company, and while most people are unfamiliar with the technical writing process, Hayek shed some light on the essence of what he does.

“A tech writer serves those engineers and marketers in a corporation. They are sort of the support structure that provides documentation and content for the other operations...trying to write documentation for how to use software developed by a specific company, for internal use or for external communications - how to design press releases, how to write grants to get more money, how to apply for [FDA] approval...” he said.

The list goes on. But what Hayek makes indelibly clear is just how broad the professional world is for English majors. And while he’s always been a strong writer, his path to technical writing was not immediate. As he pursued his Ph.D. at Virginia Tech, Hayek secured a Teaching Assistantship in the English Department where technical writing courses were being developed to serve the other colleges. After he became involved, Hayek joined the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and the Association for Business Communication, where he is still an active member today.

Staying involved in the technical writing societies has been one way Hayek has made connections and gained new opportunities in his career. But interestingly enough, there’s apparently not that many youthful writers in the mix. Hayek, being one of the youngest members of these societies, shared some funny conversations between older

colleagues: how all his professional work has been completed digitally whereas the “veterans” claim to uncover old cardboard boxes of past projects in their attics, all hard copies. The reality is clear - technical writing (along with everything else) is changing. Hayek points out:

“It’s all digital and online. And so the same principles apply like usability and functionality, it’s just different media now and it really just opened up a whole lot more opportunities to communicate and to reach wider, broader and more varied and diverse audiences in terms of diverse languages, diverse abilities and all that kind of stuff. The digital deployment of these materials and content - it’s just more accessible,” he said.

For Hayek, that idea of accessibility is what keeps him connected to his work as a tech writer. It’s how he believes technical writers can make a difference in the world. Innovations in document design and deployment allow Hayek’s writing to touch the lives of more people than ever before. Fired up about this aspect of his work, Hayek shared how developments like closed captioning are particularly interesting to tech writers who are focused on communicating information across all barriers. In a day and age where content is everywhere, Hayek is driven to make it accessible to everyone.

On the other hand, it’s not all sunshine and roses. Technical writing can be a downright challenging pursuit. As a UIC professor, Hayek is appropriately straightforward about this. “You gotta make it exciting for yourself cause it can get boring. I mean come on, you’re writing documentation, you’re writing instruction sets, and manuals or whatever. So innovation and that kind of thing...you gotta be a little nerdy about it to get excited and jazzed up - but just like anything else it’s not for everyone,” he said.

At the end of the day, someone needs to do it. In his teaching, Hayek tries to make it fun by bringing a dry humor to the daily work that keeps students out of their own heads. He also knows exactly what it takes to succeed in this gig and highlights the two key qualities that every good tech writer needs.

“Patience and communication.... Sometimes the teams and subject matter experts you’re working with are not that patient and not that communicative and not that sociable. Definitely being a people person helps. That goes a really long way because it’s a lot of group and team writing. You’ve got to take feedback from a whole bunch of different stakeholders - from users, to managers, to the coders, and developers...you’ve got to enjoy that a lot,” he said.

Now at a great place in his career where he gets to write and teach for a living, Hayek is passionate about helping his students get involved in the industry. His advice for those

looking to break in as a technical writer is simple: just apply. Submit an application, join the mentorship program offered by STC Chicago, but above all - put yourself out there. As for Hayek's endeavors as a technical writer, he was most recently published in *Aether: A Journal of Strategic Airpower & Spacepower*, where his research in military rhetoric and national security strategy allows him to write about what he loves. That being said, Hayek writes across multiple industries. His article *Access and Ability: Digital Spaces Mediate Differences in Ability* explored how technological innovation increases accessibility for users and was prepared for the Proceedings of the Computers & Writing Conference in 2019. He's also written about Translingual online writing for the Proceedings of the 84th Annual Conference of the Association for Business Communication. Ultimately, Hayek's work as a writer and teacher continues to demonstrate excellence in making complicated technical information accessible to readers.