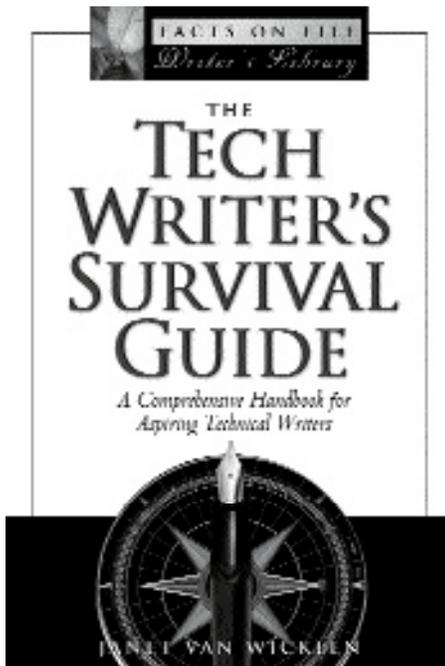


edited by Stephanie Deming



THE TECH WRITER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE: A COMPREHENSIVE HANDBOOK FOR ASPIRING TECHNICAL WRITERS. JANET VAN WICKLEN. NEW YORK: CHECKMARK BOOKS; 2001. 269 PAGES. SOFTCOVER \$15.95. ISBN 0-8160-4039-7.

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This book is true to its title: It is an overview of technical writing for beginning or prospective technical writers. There are four major parts of two or more chapters each plus three appendixes. The writing is clear, the advice sound, and the editing well done. The author focuses on technical writing for software and hardware documentation, so parts of some chapters do not closely match the needs or mindset of a science writer or editor.

Part I comprises six chapters that cover what technical writing is, its history, backgrounds of technical writers, choosing a field, the job hunt, and a "typical" day for a technical writer. Given my 20+ years as a technical editor and writer, I did not learn much here, but there is excellent advice and basic information that a new technical writer would want. For example, Van Wicklen states that technical writers need to understand the technologies they document and that the knowledge does not have to be school-based, but getting it somehow is necessary (these points apply just as well to technical editors and their work).

The three chapters of Part II cover knowing your subject matter, communicating with engineers, and knowing your audience. The first of these chapters expands on the example in the paragraph above: that is, for technical documents, you cannot write about something you do not know about. I found the second chapter one of the most interesting and useful in the book; it discusses preparing for an interview with a subject-matter expert, dealing with reluctant interviewees, and other topics. Although it focuses on communicating with engineers, this chapter applies to experts in almost any field. I knew most of the points Van Wicklen makes, but it was useful to read them again in someone else's words; all editors and writers need to be reminded of basic principles and tactics every so often. The last chapter includes discussion of why multiple-audience documents often turn out poorly, how to gain information about the audience, and usability testing.

Part III contains eight chapters that start with planning a writing project (either a paper or an online document) and continue through organizing, designing online

documents, visual impact, writing, editing, the review process, and the production process. Although these chapters form the core of the book as far as the actual work of a technical writer is concerned, their coverage is necessarily brief both because of the intended audience and because covering these topics completely would require about three books. Such books—on graphic arts, technical writing, and technical editing—are readily available.

The chapter on editing contains what I perceive as the book's major error. The author states that "a good substantive edit . . . rightly rests in the writer's hands . . ." This I do not accept. From my experience in working for months researching and then writing documentation, I know for certain that I was in no position to edit that documentation objectively and comprehensively, nor was I distanced enough from the writing, even after several weeks, to find the inevitable technical errors or inconsistencies in the pages I had written. Despite my extensive experience as a technical editor, someone else needed to edit my writing, and I was suitably humbled each time someone did so. Many firms with documentation functions see an editor as a luxury that keeps them from hiring another productive technical writer. Their economic viewpoint on this subject, however, does not justify translation into the principle that writers should edit their own work.

Part IV concludes the book with two chapters, one on hazards of technical writing, including stress and physical ailments, and the second on career excellence. The appendixes list academic programs in technical communication, list professional associations, and offer an example of a document plan.

This book should be valuable to the intended audience, providing some idea of what technical writing is like in the real world, what knowledge is needed, and what is involved in the job besides the writing itself. This is not a book for the libraries of most technical editors or experienced technical writers, but Van Wicklen has produced a book that should meet quite well the needs of her audience of "aspiring technical writers".