



Landing the Perfect Technical Writing Job

by Marla Emery

Did you ever have a job interview where you left feeling certain that you would be offered the job and then weren't? It's possible that something went wrong during the interview process. Here are some tips on how to avoid some of the common mistakes that applicants make so you can improve your chances of getting the next job that you want.

Here are the five phases of the interview process that we use from the perspective of the job applicant. Those phases are:

Phase 1 Submitting a resume for review

Phase 2 The phone interview

Phase 3 Personal interview with:

- ◆ Manager
- ◆ Group
- ◆ Summary with manager

Phase 4 The take-home writing test

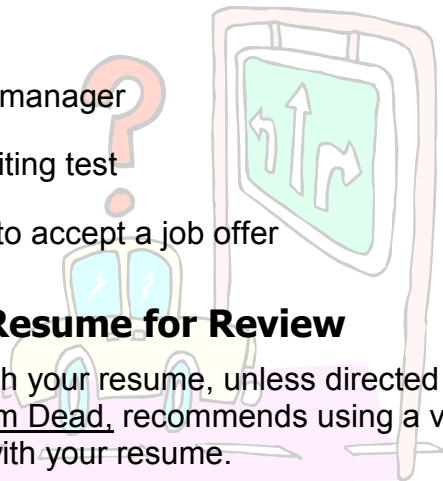
Phase 5 Deciding whether to accept a job offer

Phase 1: Submitting a Resume for Review

Always include a cover letter with your resume, unless directed otherwise. Martin Yate, author of [Knock' Em Dead](#), recommends using a very effective Executive Briefing cover letter with your resume.

A successful applicant will highlight key points that managers are looking for in his/her resume. It should be obvious by looking at the resume what value you will bring to a prospective employer. In my opinion, a resume should include:

- ◆ A skills summary or a summary of professional experience
- ◆ A work history
- ◆ Software skills
- ◆ Education



Summary of Professional Experience

Here's an example of a summary of professional experience:

Serve as a software documentation specialist with 20 years of experience in the telecommunications industry. Manage large projects as team leader, delivering complex documents using state-of-the-art publishing tools. Learn complex technology quickly.

Work History: What Have You Done?

Each job description must provide details about:

- ◆ The types of documentation you have written
- ◆ Documentation deliverables you have provided (online help, HTML, printed books)
- ◆ Who used the documentation you wrote
- ◆ The types of products and platforms that the products used

For example, a job description for a technical writing position might read like this:

Using FrontPage98, designed, implemented, and maintained a corporate Intranet to provide HTML-based reference materials for corporate employees, locally and internationally.

Software Skills and Your Level of Expertise

I recommend a simple list of software tools that you have used categorized by levels of expertise, as follows:

Professional Skills:

Expert Knowledge: FrameMaker 5.0, Microsoft Word 7.0, 6.0, Microsoft FrontPage98, RoboHelp 5.0, Microsoft Excel, Presto! PageManager, VistaScan32, UNIX (vi, nroff, troff)

Proficient Working Knowledge: Adobe Products (Acrobat, Writer, Photo Deluxe), HiJack Pro

Working Knowledge: HTML, Java, various graphics packages, Microsoft Publisher98

Education and Training

Provide names of schools that you've attended, dates of graduation, and degrees. Also mention any special certifications, relevant seminars and professional development classes. Include membership in professional organizations and any awards you have received.

Professional Training, Seminars, Certifications

FrameMaker Training Course

AT&T Bell Laboratories Certified INTERLEAF Training Course

AT&T Bell Laboratories Certified UNIX System Administration Course

Professional Associations and Awards

Member, Society for Technical Communications Philadelphia Chapter since 1990

Award of Excellence, STC Publications Competition, 1994

Phase 2: The Phone Interview

There are several things that you can do to make your phone interview a success:

- ◆ Always schedule the phone interview ahead of time. If an interviewer calls at an inconvenient time, ask to reschedule to a time when you can be prepared for the call.
- ◆ Research the company before the interview.
- ◆ Let the interviewer call you so that you don't catch interviewer off guard.
- ◆ Take notes!
- ◆ Don't ramble! Answer questions directly and concisely.
- ◆ Ask questions!

Sample Questions to Ask during a Phone Interview

Always think of several questions to ask during the phone interview. Relevant questions show that you are well-informed and interested in the company. Here are some examples:

- ◆ "When I went to your company's website I noticed that you are merging with XYZ. How do you think that will affect your day-to-day operations?"
- ◆ "What qualifications are you specifically looking for?" Or, "I think I have the qualifications that you are looking for ... let me clarify."
- ◆ "On which project do you think I would be able to contribute first?"

- ◆ “What type of training would I receive as a new employee?” Or, “How do new writers usually get up to speed?”
- ◆ “When can I come in for a personal interview?” This is definitely the most important question you could ask!

Phase 3: Personal Interview

There are many obvious recommendations, such as being on time, dressing appropriately, and generally conducting yourself in a professional manner. The following is a brief overview of my personal recommendations for interviewees.

Top 10 List of Do's and Don'ts

1. Do be careful of your appearance. Good grooming and hygiene are essential!
2. Do dress in appropriate professional attire.
3. Do speak clearly and slowly (especially if English is not your first language).
4. Do ask appropriate questions.
5. Do try not to be nervous.
6. Do read Knock' Em Dead.
7. Do use common sense.
8. Don't talk over the interviewer.
9. Don't be boisterous or pushy.
10. Don't tell jokes. Don't be too familiar.

Meeting the Team

Some employers require you to interview with the team. During a team meeting, you may find that you are being asked too many questions at once or that more than one person is speaking at a time. This can make it difficult to follow the conversation. To tactfully handle this situation, you may want to say in a controlled but pleasant voice, “These are all good questions and I'd like to answer all of them, but can you ask them one at a time, please?”

Some questions that you may want to ask during the team meeting are:

- ◆ “What is your position?” “Who do you report to?”
- ◆ “What do you like about working for this company?”
- ◆ “What don't you like about your job?”
- ◆ “What are your manager's strengths?”

Summary with the Manager

If you have the opportunity to meet with the manager after the team meeting, be ready to answer the question, "What did you learn?" Now would be a great time to mention how you can make a contribution or solve a problem that they have! Think in terms of "This is what the manager requires. This is what I can provide." Relate what you learned to how you can make a contribution!

For example, one possible response might be:

"I learned that this position is very similar to my current job" (or one I did, or would like to do). For example, "In my present position, I work with developers and I need to interview them to get the information for the documents that I write. I use RoboHelp just as you do here to develop my online help projects. Bob told me that he's producing an HTML help system. I've done that and I really think that I could help him!"

Phase 4: Acing the Writing Test

I stressed the importance of asking questions during the interview. Asking questions gives the interviewer the impression that you are perceptive and inquisitive, and that you think beyond the obvious. In the case of a writing test, though, I would not recommend asking too many questions. If the test is well thought out and designed properly, one of the objectives of the test may be to see how you "figure it out".

I recommend that you complete the test based on your best assumptions about what the test author is looking for. Include a list of your assumptions with your response when you return the test.

Phase 5: Deciding Whether to Accept a Job Offer

The initial relief and excitement of receiving a job offer may soon turn to dismay as you wonder whether this is the right job for you. The chemistry you experienced when you interviewed is a very important indicator. Did you feel you fit in well with other team members? Are the responsibilities defined clearly enough? Are you comfortable with the organizational structure, including your relationship with your supervisor? Would you enjoy this job? Do you have any concerns that should be addressed before you accept the position? A good fit in these areas can be just as important as your compensation or your comfort with the technical aspects of the job requirements.

Walking in the Interviewer's Shoes

Besides reading books and articles intended for job hunters, you can also acquire valuable insight into the interviewer's needs by reviewing books and articles written for the interviewer. This will give you a clearer understanding of what employers are looking for in an employee.

Best of luck!

About the Author

Marla Emery has been in the technical communications field for over 20 years and currently works at Computer Associates. This article was adapted from a presentation that she made for Career Day 1999, sponsored by the [Philadelphia Metro Chapter of the Society for Technical Communications](#).