Portfolios and the Job Search—Getting Prepared

I want to market myself as a versatile technical and professional communicator. I want people to see that I can adapt to different situations. Norma

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 1 through 7 have guided you through the portfolio-building process, providing specific guidelines on how to select, design, create, and revise the documents to be included in your portfolios. Now you are ready to plan your strategy for using the portfolios in your job search. Before taking the portfolios to a job interview, you will need to research the type of job you want and create or update your employment documents. Chapter 8 presents guidelines on how to do the following:

- Developing a marketing plan for your job search
- Preparing or updating your employment documents

Chapter 9 continues the discussion by focusing on the job interview, including how to use your portfolio during the interview.

DEVELOPING A MARKETING PLAN

In today’s job market, the name of the game is change. A typical worker today can expect to have as many as 12–15 different employers during his or her work life, working just long enough to complete a project or two (Bolles 1999, 141). Conlin uses the term “free agents” to describe this new workforce and estimates that roughly 41 percent of the U.S workforce will be free agents by 2010 (Conlin, 2000, 169–170). No matter what your major, you can expect multiple employers and jobs during your professional career (Lannon 2003, 434). This is particularly true for technical and professional communicators.

To prepare for the changes you will encounter in the workplace, it is important to develop a marketing plan for your job search. If you are about to begin your career as a professional communicator, your marketing plan may be based on the following activities:

- Identifying your strengths and weaknesses
- Interviewing a professional communicator
- Finding a mentor
- Identifying your market
- Researching and collecting information on companies that employ technical and/or professional communicators
- Learning the language of potential employers
- Finding information on companies in your field
- Conducting an Internet job search
- Creating a network of contacts
Identifying your strengths and weaknesses

You probably did a self-assessment when you started developing the portfolio plan. However, you must now consider your strengths and weaknesses from a slightly different perspective, relating them to the job market you are about to enter. A well-known syndicated cartoonist offered the following advice to a graduating college class: “Identify what you want to do in life and then find someone to pay you to do it.” That advice is still valuable today, and a self-assessment will help you identify what career path in technical and professional communication you may want to follow. Two of the more popular books that can help you identify strengths and weaknesses are Richard Bolles’ *What Color Is Your Parachute?,* now in its 33rd edition, and Janet Van Wicklen’s *The Tech Writer’s Survival Guide.* There are many Web sites that offer personality profile tests, and several are discussed in Chapter 2. Some of these tests are free; other sites offer a free introductory version but charge a fee if you want to take the complete test. You can find these sites by doing a search using your favorite search engine. Another very effective way to identify your strengths and weaknesses is to do the activities in Exercise 8.1.

After completing your self-assessment, you may want to return to the professional identity work done in Chapter 2 with a new eye toward revising it for your job search. In her revised personality profile, Miranda, a senior graduating with a degree in technical and professional communication, matches her willingness to take calculated risks and a desire to share what she’s learned with her decision to pursue freelance work. Miranda makes the following observations regarding this decision:

> It hits me as I read about how freelance work is actually more secure and how freelance writers can market themselves while supplementing their income. I think to myself—I can do this! And I think I can do this because I’m in control. I don’t mind risk as long as I can manage it, understand it. I think this confidence that I can understand and manage risk comes from my love of planning. Although I was stressed all semester long over my portfolio, I felt okay with the progress because everything was planned. I knew where I was going and how I was getting there.

Michel, on the other hand, describes her dream job as that of a writer/editor for a large government agency that stresses video production and multimedia. Michel, on the other hand, describes her dream job as that of a writer/editor for a large government agency. As long as I make enough money to live on, salary isn’t a big issue. With the government, I’d have great benefits, job security, and stability.

In his personality profile, Brian W., a senior graduating with a degree in technical and professional communication, links his love of graphics and technology to a career in professional communication that stresses video production and multimedia.

**EXERCISE 8.1 FOUR WAYS TO UNCOVER YOUR ABILITIES**

1. List five of your achievements in order of importance.
2. Identify the skills that contributed to each achievement.
3. List what you liked best in work you’ve done before.
4. List examples of your soft skills, that is, skills that can’t be quantified or easily measured, such as interpersonal skills, ability to work on project teams, and other people skills that employers mention in their job ads.

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Interviewing a professional communicator

Particularly if you have little or no work experience in technical or professional communication, you should interview someone in that profession. Interviewing a professional communicator will help you learn the realities of the workplace. The person you interview can provide tips on how to conduct a successful job search and how to match your strengths with a specific job description, among other things. This person might even agree to become a mentor, advising you as you create and later revise your resume and portfolio.

Finding a mentor

If you are putting together a professional portfolio, your instructor may assign you a mentor. This person can be a wonderful resource to call on when you plan, select, and organize the artifacts for your portfolio. If you are an entry-level technical writer, you may want to ask a senior writer to help you select your best work for the portfolio. When Nanette was selecting portfolio projects for her senior capstone course in her major, the met with her mentor, who suggested that she add more “spark” to her portfolio. Nanette showed him some street sign images that she was thinking about using as graphic symbols of the different career paths open to her as a professional communicator. He suggested that she use these signs as a theme for her portfolio. Brian W. also received helpful tips from his mentor, who suggested that he add more multimedia projects to his portfolio to emphasize his interest in finding a multimedia position. Another effective way to find a mentor is to check the Web sites of local chaps of professional communication organizations such as the Society for Technical Communication that often have mentorship programs. The career center at your school may also offer resources for seniors.

Mentors can also help you learn more about the job market and help you find a position that matches your specific interests. For example, Norma set up an interview with her mentor, a knowledge-base content developer, a relatively new area of technical communication that focuses on helping companies maximize their intellectual capital. From the interview, Norma picked up several tips on how to conduct a successful job search, including the following:

- Identify the work environment where you would be most productive (cultural or formal, large or small company).
- Build a network of friends, relatives, and working professionals who can provide job leads.
- Be willing to relocate to places where the opportunities exist.
- Keep an accurate logging and tracking system on the companies you have researched.

Trina, who was interested in finding out what writers do in information technology departments, interviewed Mary, the sole technical writer in such a department. Mary provided a list of her job responsibilities, which included the following:

- Review outstanding projects and ad hoc requests for application documentation and help files.
- Periodically review training materials created for applications.
- Create user documentation from business analysis documents and screenshots to develop a Web site help system.
- Train new users.

Trina also learned that Mary’s work environment was a small office cubicle where Mary worked alone on her projects.
Sarah, who is interested in a public relations and marketing career, interviewed Susan, the director of marketing at a small software company. Susan commented on how “marketing” can sometimes be a generic term for many different functions such as corporate communications, product marketing, and brand marketing. Sarah learned that brand marketing can include public relations (press releases, media relations, and speaking events), trade shows (demonstrations, signage, session presentations, and contests), corporate and product marketing documents (brochures, CDs, flash presentations, and audiovisual storyboard and scripting), and Web site development and maintenance. Sarah also gained some valuable tips on how to market herself:

- Join the American Marketing Association.
- Network through local professional writing associations, marketing associations, alumni, and professors.
- Use corporate Web sites to research local companies that have visible marketing and public relations functions.
- Do contract work through an agency (a good way to transform a temporary or part-time position into a full-time position).

Identifying your market

Clearly, there are many methods that you can use to find a job. Table 8.1 summarizes 12 of the most common ones. As the table shows, almost half of the search methods involve some form of networking. Creating a network of potential job leads may be the most valuable strategy you develop for your job search. Networking is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### Table 8.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Total Job Seekers Using the Method</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Effectiveness Rate*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>Applied directly to employer</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>Asked friends about jobs where they work</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>Asked friends about jobs elsewhere</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>Asked relatives about jobs where they work</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>Asked relatives about jobs elsewhere</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>Answered local newspaper ads</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>Private employment agency</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>School placement office</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>Civil Service test</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Asked teacher or professor</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Placed ad in local newspaper</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>Union hiring hall</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A percentage obtained by dividing the number of job seekers who actually found work using the method by the total number of job seekers who tried to use that method, whether successfully or not. 


---

**Researching and collecting information on companies that employ technical and/or professional communicators**

Whether you are a student or a recent graduate, you may want to begin researching and collecting company information by searching the job databases at your university’s career resources center. However, this search for technical writing and professional communication positions may turn up very few job leads. Don’t despair. The job titles “technical writer” and “professional communicator” are very broad, encompassing several more specific job titles and descriptions such as those mentioned in Chapter 1. In “Online Job Searching: Clicking Your Way to Employment” (2003), Janel Bloch suggests that you search for job descriptions under a variety of terms. Including the following:

- Audience
- Graphic design
- Information design
- Instructional design
- Medical communication, medical writer
- Technical communication
- Technical editor, technical editing
- Technical writer, technical writing
- Usability
- Web design

You may also want to consider using these additional terms in your search:

- Communications specialist
- Corporate communications specialist
- Editor
- Journalist
- Knowledge manager
- Marketing publication specialist
- Multimedia specialist
- Public relations
- Translator
- User documentation specialist
- Video production
- Web usability specialist

Another potentially effective search technique, Bloch notes, is to combine job descriptions with specific software tools such as PageMaker or FrameMaker (Bloch 2003, 14). Even though technical and professional communicators refer to themselves by a variety of job titles, no matter what the title, the job outlook for technical communicators is very bright. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook (2004-05, 1, 6) predicts a 10 to 20 percent growth rate up through 2012.

**Learning the language of potential employers**

You should become very familiar with the language that potential employers use in describing the positions they offer for professional communicators. Do this by beginning your job search early and by reviewing as many job advertisements on the Internet and in print as you can. The following description of an entry-level professional communication position with an instructional design company uses the terms “sales training.”
"customer service," and "multimedia." If you decided to apply for this position, you would probably want to use some of these terms in your letter of application and perhaps even on your resume. This is particularly true today, since so many resumes are optically scanned for terms that match the terms the employer has used in the job description. Tips on how to write a scannable resume are presented later in this chapter.

**SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION FOR AN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER POSITION**

Our projects cover a wide range of content areas including sales training, software training, product knowledge, customer service, operations, logistics, performance appraisal, process and procedures, and others. We develop our training packages in print, Web-based, multimedia, video, and audio, as well as converting materials for Web distribution. We also design and produce job aids, including quick reference guides, and online help for end users.

**EXERCISE 8.2 SELECTING TERMS TO USE IN A SCANNABLE RESUME**

Examine the following job description and write down five terms that you would consider including in a scannable version of your resume. Be prepared to justify your choices.

**EXERCISE 8.3 ANALYZING COMPANY WEB SITES**

Find and then analyze three company Web sites for information on the following:

- Products and/or services
- Employment opportunities
- Research and development activities

Write your analysis (approximately one paragraph per company).

**TABLE 8.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Job Search Sources</th>
<th>Relevant Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual report (often available at company Web sites, your career center, or in your library)</td>
<td>What are the company’s products and services? Are stockholders making a profit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web sites or media kits (available from company’s public relations office)</td>
<td>What can you learn about the firm’s corporate culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel manuals and other policy guidelines</td>
<td>How committed is the firm to training? What are the benefits and retirement programs? What are its customary career paths?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates of your college or university now working with this firm</td>
<td>What sort of reputation does your school have among decision-makers at the company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business sections of newspapers and magazines</td>
<td>What kind of news gets generated about the company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional organizations or associations</td>
<td>Is the company active within its profession?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stock reports</td>
<td>Is the firm making money? How has the company performed during the last 5 years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accrediting agencies or organizations</td>
<td>How has the company fared during peer evaluations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former employees</td>
<td>Why have people left the company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current employees</td>
<td>What do employees like or dislike about the company? Why do they stay?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXERCISE 8.4 CONDUCTING AN INTERNET JOB SEARCH**

For technical and professional communicators looking for work, the Internet is a very valuable resource. You may recall from Chapter 1 that Brian D., a recent graduate of a professional communication program, received an interview and a job offer based exclusively on his Internet resume and portfolio. Remember, however, that an Internet search should be only one of your job-search strategies, and you need to be an educated user if you decide to post your resume to any of the job-search sites providing that service. Most popular job-search...
sites provide different types of privacy protection for users. However, as Janel Bloch notes in “Online Job Searching,” none of these safeguards are foolproof (Bloch 2003, 12):

The most useful Internet job-search sites will be one of these types:
- General search sites
- Job search sites related to technical and professional communication
- Professional association sites

Most general search sites have extensive databases of job listings for many different types of professional job seekers. The more popular sites provide an “Advice and Resources” link to many helpful job-related articles (Bloch 2003, 13). Other general search sites provide links to articles on self-assessment, resumes, and interviewing tips.

Table 8.3 provides a brief summary of some of the more popular general job search sites that you may want to use to begin your Internet search. Appendix A lists the URLs for these sites. Table 8.4 lists some of the more popular job-search sites for technical and professional communication. The URLs for these sites are listed in Appendix A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 8.3</th>
<th>Sample Career Resource Websites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Web Site</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America's Job Bank</td>
<td>Provides a computerized network that lists 1,800 state employment services offices. This site has been selected by several Internet rating services as one of the top Internet sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avvo Central</td>
<td>A free federal employment service that lists over 35,000 government jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careerbuilder.com</td>
<td>Claims to be the nation’s largest employment network. Includes a host of job-related links. Also includes personal job searches and job tips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers at Yahoo!</td>
<td>Allows you to browse jobs by subject, post your resume, and find a list of the most popular jobs. Also provides a career toolkit with resume tools, job alerts, and a salary wizard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FlipDog.com</td>
<td>Claims to deliver the largest number of jobs on the Internet, including those of small companies and public and private companies. Services are free to the job seeker. Provides services for posting resumes and applying for jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotjobs.com</td>
<td>Similar to Careerbuilder.com. Has a large database of jobs to search from, a very detailed search engine, and a career tools section where you can find articles and information about your industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Bank USA</td>
<td>Features U.S. and International job listings. A special feature lets users search the world’s largest Web job sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newbie Tech Writer</td>
<td>Provides links to a variety of job-search Web sites for new technical writers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicalwriterjobs.com</td>
<td>Divided into several areas including “Find Technical Writer Jobs,” employers, recruitment firms, and advertising agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechWriting at About.com</td>
<td>Provides information about freelance writing, job-search information, contracts, grant writing, journalism, style guides, and professional groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techwritingjobs.com</td>
<td>Set up specifically for technical writers. Allows you to search for jobs and offers a bulletin board of job fairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Write Jobs</td>
<td>Posts job opportunities for writers. Positions include journalism, editing, writing (freelance and staff), and technical writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webdeveloper.com</td>
<td>Provides a variety of resources relating to Web site development. Includes a technical job center service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writerfind.com</td>
<td>Describes itself as a marketplace for professional writers and employers who are looking for freelance and telecommuting jobs or posting such jobs. Job postings are international and include technical writers, instructional writers, and scriptwriters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.5 provides a list of some of the major professional associations for writers and communication specialists. Again, the URLs are listed in Appendix A. Remember that these lists of sites comprise only the tip of the iceberg.

Creating a network of contacts

The first networking tip that you should put into practice is to tell everyone you know that you are looking for a job. The knowledge-base content developer mentioned earlier in this chapter notes that almost every job she’s ever found involved networking. For most technical and professional communicators, networking is a survival skill because most of these positions are not found through traditional sources such as your university’s career center. Having your own Web site with a link to employment documents is one effective way to network. In short, as Van Wicklen notes in The Tech Writer’s Survival Guide, networking involves the practice of establishing friendly contacts with other professionals to share work-related information (Van Wicklen 2001, 49).

How to network

Remember that when you are networking, you are marketing yourself. The networking tips in Figure 8.1 should help you do so effectively. In addition to contacting the professional organizations listed in Table 8.5, you may want to extend your networking by finding out more about the following professional communication organizations, whose URLs appear in Appendix A:
- International Public Relations Association
- Society of Environmental Journalists
- Society of Publication Designers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 8.4</th>
<th>Sample Technical and Professional Communication Job Search Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Web Site</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ComputerJobs.com</td>
<td>Has an entire section devoted to technical writing. You can search for jobs based on your criteria, such as job title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elance</td>
<td>Designed to help freelancers find projects that match their skills. Offers opportunities to search for and bid on projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newbie Tech Writer</td>
<td>Provides links to a variety of job-search Web sites for new technical writers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechnicalWriterJobs.com</td>
<td>Divided into several areas including “Find Technical Writer Jobs,” employers, recruitment firms, and advertising agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TechWriting at About.com</td>
<td>Provides information about freelance writing, job-search information, contracts, grant writing, journalism, style guides, and professional groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techwritingjobs.com</td>
<td>Set up specifically for technical writers. Allows you to search for jobs and offers a bulletin board of job fairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Write Jobs</td>
<td>Posts job opportunities for writers. Positions include journalism, editing, writing (freelance and staff), and technical writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WebDeveloper.com</td>
<td>Provides a variety of resources relating to Web site development. Includes a technical job center service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writerfind.com</td>
<td>Describes itself as a marketplace for professional writers and employers who are looking for freelance and telecommuting jobs or posting such jobs. Job postings are international and include technical writers, instructional writers, and scriptwriters.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.5 provides a short description of some of the major professional associations for writers and communication specialists. Again, the URLs are listed in Appendix A.
### TABLE 8.5 Selected Professional Associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Association</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Marketing Association</td>
<td>A major association of marketing professionals with a membership of 38,000. Includes a career center where you can post resumes, search for jobs, and find salary information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Medical Writers Association</td>
<td>The major professional association for medical writers. Its mission is to promote excellence in biomedical communication. Provides job market information including a job-search feature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Society for Training and Authors</td>
<td>The major professional association for trainers. Offers a career center with job listings and a resume bank, as well as a comprehensive training literature database.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Society of Journalists and Authors</td>
<td>Provides professional freelance writers with a variety of services including rates, contracts, and conferences. Includes a writer referral service that provides access to jobs and project leads.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association of Health Care Journalists</td>
<td>A nonprofit organization advancing the public's understanding of health care issues. Promotes highest standards in reporting, writing about, and editing health care journalism. Includes job postings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Artists Guild</td>
<td>Provides a jobline news service listing freelance and staff employment opportunities in the graphic arts industry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Association of Business Communicators</td>
<td>Includes a job center for both job seekers and employers where jobs are listed and resumes can be posted and viewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Webmasters Association</td>
<td>Provides professional advancement opportunities for individuals pursuing a Web career. Offers a variety of services including a jobs and resume resource for Web and information technology industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association of Science Writers</td>
<td>The major professional organization for science writers that provides a link to job services for employers and members. Also provides a freelance site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society for Technical Communication</td>
<td>The major professional organization for technical writers, technical editors, information architects, usability specialists, and other technical communication professionals worldwide. Provides a variety of links including links to local chapters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Usability Professionals' Association (UPA)</td>
<td>Supports professionals who advance the development of usable products and who act as advocates for users. Provides links to a consultants' directory and job bank.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You should also develop a tracking system to organize your networking and job-search activities. You can do this by creating an electronic spreadsheet with detailed information on who you contacted, how, and when. In addition, summarize what was said and what action was taken, if any. Finally, note what the next step will be and who will take it. You may want to print out a copy of your recent job-search activities so that you can check it often to avoid missing deadlines.

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1. Develop a list of contacts including business associates, classmates, teachers, and friends. Give each of them your business card with the URL of your Web portfolio.
2. Target companies that you would like to work for in advance of your graduation and before you need another job.
3. Learn about your target company's products/services and the types of jobs they have in professional communication. Try to find out about their hiring procedure.
4. Prepare a call list to work from daily and force yourself to make a certain number of calls per day. Say that you are calling for advice on how to enter the field of professional communication.
5. Try to get over the feeling that you are bothering others. Instead, think of your questions as prompting them to talk about a mutual interest: professional communication.
6. Subscribe to related industry trade journals and newsletters.
7. Subscribe to list serves and e-mail networking services that pertain to professional communication.
8. Take seminars and courses.
9. Keep your networking conversation brief, focused, and courteous.
10. Become active in your professional organizations (see Table 8.5), including any special interest groups (SIGs) or local chapters in your city or town.
11. Use any mentoring services provided by your local professional communication organization. Often you will find a link on that organization's Web site.
12. Stay in the loop. Be persistent but tactful. Call back in 5 or 6 weeks if you don't hear from someone.
13. Remember to thank those who helped you.

**FIGURE 8.1**

Thirteen Key Networking Tips

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### PREPARING OR UPDATING YOUR EMPLOYMENT DOCUMENTS

At a minimum, your employment documents should include the following:

- Current resume
- Letter of application/cover letter
- References
- Portfolio

#### Preparing a current resume

Whether you are preparing for your first job as a professional communicator or are already employed in this field, you will need to update your resume to include your current skills and abilities. The purpose of your resume and cover letter is to get you interviews. You can do this by organizing the information on your resume so that you grab the attention of a potential employer in 20 to 30 seconds. Within this time period, most hiring managers will have made a decision about pursuing your application.

#### Features of the standard resume

The vast majority of resumes will have the following features:

- Contact information
- Career or professional objective
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- Education summary
- Employment summary
- Special skills, awards, certifications, professional affiliations, languages
- References and portfolio

If you are applying for your first job as a professional communicator, you should probably emphasize your education (including projects you created). As you acquire employment experience in professional communication, your resume will emphasize your workplace experience.

Contact Information. Provide your full name, mailing address with zip code, e-mail address, and phone number(s). If you have voice mail, make sure that your message sounds professional. If your e-mail address is comical or cute, change it or open a new e-mail account for your job search. If you include both a school address and a home address on your resume, make it clear which one is your primary address.

Career or professional objective. For many job seekers, the career objective or professional objective is the most difficult part of the resume to write. It should be specific to add focus to the rest of the resume but not so specific that it might eliminate you from positions for which you are qualified. Try to avoid vague statements such as an entry-level professional writing position where I can apply my education and experience.

Instead, focus on a set of specific skills that you have already identified in your work in Chapter 2 on establishing a professional identity. You may also want to include both immediate and long-term objectives. Figure 8.2 provides two examples of effective career objectives.

**EXERCISE 8.4 WRITING CAREER OBJECTIVES**

Write two types of career objectives, one a skills objective and the other a short-term and a long-term objective.

**Education summary.** As noted earlier, a good practice is to place your education summary before your employment summary if your education has provided most of your marketable skills, projects, and software knowledge. Use a reverse chronological order, listing your most recent or current school first and then working backward, listing the other schools where you have received degrees (see Figure 8.4). Include the exact name of your major and of any minors or certificates that you may have completed or will complete before you graduate. List relevant courses, projects, and software tools that clearly match the job you seek. Finally, you might include your grade point average if it distinguishes you from other students in your major. Your adviser or a teacher in your major subject area will tell you if your grade point average places you in the top 25 percent of your class. If you paid for part or all of your education by working full-time or part-time, it never hurts to note the percentage of your tuition earned through working.

**Example of a skills objective**

Multimedia specialist for a company that develops Web sites and multimedia training

**Example of an immediate and a long-term objective**

**Immediate objective:** Entry-level technical writer with a software firm

**Long-term objective:** Progression to project manager with responsibilities for scheduling document development and for hiring new writers

**Figure 8.2 Sample Career Objectives**

**Employment summary.** If your employment record is a bigger selling point than your education, present it first. Begin with your most recent position and work backward. Include dates of employment and names of employers, noting whether the position was full-time or part-time. If you worked part-time, include the number of hours per week. Give your job title with a short description of your responsibilities. If you were promoted, note it. If your employment history is largely unrelated to professional communication, focus more on soft skills (organizational, interpersonal, leadership) that you have honed—for example, as an assistant manager at a fast-food restaurant. In that case, you may want to arrange your resume using the combination format (see Figure 8.6). If you have military experience, note it here. If you are willing to relocate, state that too.

**Special skills, awards, certifications, professional affiliations, languages.** List any special skills that pertain to the type of position you are seeking. In particular, note relevant software skills—especially if you have used that software to create a piece for your portfolio. If you belong to a professional organization, note it here along with the membership dates. Mention your membership in campus organizations, club groups, or volunteer organizations, noting any leadership positions you may have held. If you know a foreign language, make sure you mention it. In addition, list any certifications that you have, particularly if they indicate marketable skills. Finally, include any awards that you have received, such as being selected for Who's Who Among Students.

**References and portfolio.** There are two methods for including references on a resume. The first, and more popular, approach is to say “References are available upon request.” If you choose this method, make sure that your reference letters are available when an employer requests them. The second method is to list three or four individuals who have agreed beforehand to write strong letters of recommendation. Make sure your references are aware that they are listed on your resume and that they might be contacted when you begin your job search.

Avoid asking people who don’t know you well or who might be less than impressed with your work. Letters from these individuals are likely to be too general to be persuasive or might even damn you with faint praise. Select individuals who know you well so that they can discuss your character traits and job-related details in skill sets and work experience that a potential employer will be reviewing. Detailed letters of recommendation are time-consuming to write, so give your references enough lead time to prepare them. Finally, make sure that your resume indicates that you have a portfolio. If your portfolio is Web-hosted, provide the URL. If it is not Web-hosted, you can say, “Portfolio is available upon request.” Make sure that several CD versions of your portfolio are ready to send should a potential employer request one.

**Double check everything**

Carefully proofread every writing sample you have included before the interview. Check all the links in your electronic portfolio to make sure that they work. Ask the interviewer what type of computer, operating system, and memory capacity he or she has so that your electronic portfolio will run in full version on that computer. Make sure that you have multiple resumes so that you can leave copies behind.

**Tips for designing an effective resume**

Figure 8.3 lists 10 tips that will help you design an effective resume.

Ordinarily, it is a good idea to have your resume available in two different styles so that you can select the one that best addresses the qualifications in the job ad. A scavenger version of your resume should also be available to send electronically. The styles are as follows:

- Chronological style
- Functional style
- Combination style
- Scannable style
**Chronological resume.** The chronological resume lists your employment history with the most recent job information first. This resume style has several advantages. It is the easiest to prepare, since its content is arranged by dates, companies, and titles. It emphasizes your yearly employment record. Professional interviewers are very familiar with the chronological resume, and it provides a guide for discussing work experience. However, the chronological resume also has drawbacks. It reveals gaps in employment and can put an undue emphasis on unrelated jobs, summer jobs, or part-time jobs. It can also deemphasize skill areas unless these areas are reflected in the most current job. Figure 8.4 shows the chronological resume of a hypothetical student named Frank, whose work experience is presented from latest to earliest. Frank also mentions relevant courses and includes a reference to his portfolio.

**Functional resume.** The functional resume works well if you want to summarize skills and/or work experience developed over several years. Instead of presenting a list of jobs and dates, the functional resume allows you to highlight those duties and skill sets that best match the job description. For example, you may have ever the chronological resume also has drawbacks. It reveals gaps in employment and can put an undeserved emphasis on unrelated jobs, summer jobs, or part-time jobs. It can also deemphasize skill areas unless these areas are reflected in the most current job. Figure 8.4 shows the chronological resume of a hypothetical student named Frank, whose work experience is presented from latest to earliest. Frank also mentions relevant courses and includes a reference to his portfolio.

**Functional resume.** The functional resume works well if you want to summarize skills and/or work experience developed over several years. Instead of presenting a list of jobs and dates, the functional resume allows you to highlight those duties and skill sets that best match the job description. For example, you may have

1. Limit your resume to one page unless you have extensive job-related skills or experience. Use at least a 10-point font.
2. Be positive. Focus on accomplishments and strengths.
3. Do not mention salary requirements. Save that discussion for the interview.
4. Use formatting techniques like boldface, bullet lists, parallel construction, and white space to make your resume easy to review.
5. Use phrases rather than complete sentences.
6. Rely on action verbs to describe qualifications and skills.

**Some verbs describing communication skills**
- authored
- communicated
- created
- designed
- edited
- marketed
- planned
- presented
- produced
- published
- revised
- trained

**Some verbs describing management skills**
- administered
- advised
- coordinated
- directed
- evaluated
- implemented
- improved
- supervised

**Some verbs describing research skills**
- administered
- analyzed
- collated
- composed
- coordinated
- designed
- diagnosed
- distributed
- evaluated
- interviewed
- investigated
- organized
- summarized
- surveyed

7. Be specific. Design your resume with particular job requirements in mind. Use the language of potential employers by reviewing job ads. Focus on technical and software skills.
8. Include quantifiable job contributions (e.g., “Modified our existing documentation process, which saved our department $75,000 a year”).
9. Use a high-quality white or off-white bond paper to print your resume (at least 20 pound bond and 25 percent cotton content).
10. Keep in mind that your resume is a writing sample and proofread it. Have a friend proofread it and then proofread it yourself one more time.

**FIGURE 8.3**
Ten Resume Tips

**FIGURE 8.4**
Sample Chronological Resume

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frank Prater</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1350 Knifedge Way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malone, NY 16786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>315.733.093 (home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>315.534.8502 (cell)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Objective**
Technical writing position using my writing skills, document design skills, and strong technical background

**Education**
2001–present
Bachelor of Sciences in Technical and Professional Communication with a minor in Computer Science (expected May 2004)
Malone University, Malone, NY
GPA 3.89 (out of 4.0)
Major courses include: Advanced Grammar and Editing, Journalism, Manuals, Proposal Writing, Public Speaking, Rhetoric, Science Writing, Technical training and coursework in document design and multimedia design
Minor courses include: C++ Programming, Computer Data Structures, Database Systems, Java Programming

**Computer Skills**

**Achievements**
Outstanding Technical and Professional Communication Senior, 2003
2nd Degree Taekwondo Black Belt

**Portfolio**
Professional portfolio available at interview
Electronic portfolio available upon request

| References |
| Available upon request |

**FIGURE 8.5**
Sample Functional Resume
job titles and dates. Figure 8.5 is an example of a functional resume. Mark's background summary highlights his training and instructional design experience so that an employer has a clear picture of his employment strengths before reading the rest of his resume.

**Combination resume.** The combination resume uses characteristics of both the chronological and functional resumes, providing versatility and allowing you to match your skill sets to specific job requirements. Another advantage of this resume is that it focuses on activities and skills rather than dates, thus deemphasizing employment gaps. The combination resume does have drawbacks, however. Its format may be less familiar to recruiters, and important dates may be difficult to find. It can also be longer than the chronological resume. Figure 8.6 is Wilda's adoption of this resume is that it focuses on activities and skills rather than dates, thus deemphasizing employment gaps. Another advantage of this resume is that it focuses on activities and skills rather than dates, thus deemphasizing employment gaps. The combination resume does have drawbacks, however. Its format may be less familiar to recruiters, and important dates may be difficult to find. It can also be longer than the chronological resume. Figure 8.6 is Wilda's

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**FIGURE 8.5**

Sample Functional Resume

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**FIGURE 8.6**

Sample Combination Resume

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**REFERENCE**

Willa's Resume

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**CHAPTER 8 | Portfolios and the Job Search—Getting Prepared**

**OBJECTIVE**

My short-term goal is to obtain an exciting career opportunity that will allow me to use my communications skills to market information for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). My long-term goal is to work in the library information division to enhance the information being provided to CDC's audience.

**EDUCATION**

Southern Polytechnic State University, Marietta, GA

B.S. in Technical and Professional Communication, graduation date May 7, 2008

**Minor in Management**

**Relevant Courses**


**COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Writing and Editing


Research and Training

- Conducted more than 100 subject matter expert interviews
- Designed course assessment surveys for all training programs I designed
- Helped more than 20 companies design training programs to support long-term organizational goals
- Developed presentations using Dreamweaver and PowerPoint
- Authored approximately 20 different user manuals and technical guides
- Developed and designed a conference poster. Generated graphics for the yearly report. Created multimedia promotional materials and graphics for various manuals and pamphlets.
- Designed and developed Web-based training, including job aids and self-paced tutorials
- Responded to incoming mail and telephone calls. Processed customer purchasing applications. Maintained resumes, personnel actions, and expenses and supervised other personnel.

**SOFTWARE TOOLS**

Word, Excel, Access, Outlook, Reference Manager, Adobe Premier Photoshop, HTML, Web design

**EMPLOYMENT**

Statistical Assistant, Centers for Disease Control, 2000-present

Administrative Assistant, Federal Highway Administration, 1997-2000

Administrative Assistant, Georgia Department of Transportation, 1994-1997

Technical Data Assistant, Naval Air Warfare Center, 1997-2000

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers

**PORTFOLIO, PUBLICATIONS AND REFERENCES**

Available upon request.
combination resume. She has included a communication skills section with subheadings for writing and editing, research and training, multimedia and graphics, and managerial communication to emphasize her strongest qualifications. Wilda has deemphasized an employment record unrelated to technical communication by placing this information near the bottom of her resume. She has also mentioned her portfolio on her resume.

Scannable resume. Employers today often receive hundreds of resumes for a single job opening. Due to the sheer volume of responses, more and more employers are requiring job applicants to submit resumes in a scannable format. You should prepare a scannable resume now in case an employer asks you for one later on. As usual, technology has provided an easy way for employers to review hundreds of resumes electronically by using an optical scanner to search for keywords and phrases that match the language in the job description. The more matches or hits your resume receives, the better your chances of being invited in for an interview. Figure 8.7 contains ten valuable tips on how to create a scannable resume.

Content of a scannable resume. While the format for a scannable resume is very different from that of a traditional resume, the content isn't except for the keyword summary. Consider using the same categories as in your traditional resume: contact information, objective, education, employment summary, skills and software tools, certifications, languages, references, and mention of a portfolio. Also, remember to use the language of the job whenever it is appropriate to describe your skills and abilities. You may want to do this by including a background or qualifications summary section, as you would in a functional resume, immediately after your career objective.

How to create a scannable resume. The following steps can be used to convert your traditional resume into a scannable version. Remember to follow the tips on content and format mentioned earlier:

1. Open your resume in Word.
2. Eliminate any special formatting and any graphics to make your resume scanner-friendly.
3. Use the "save as" option to save your resume and select "text only with line breaks."
4. Print your resume in this plain text format, revise where needed, and proofread it carefully several times.

The resume in Figure 8.8 is a scannable version of Frank Prater’s chronological resume. Notice how white space is used liberally to create breaks between sections of the resume. Another option is to submit your

1. Eliminate traditional resume formatting. Use capital letters to emphasize important information. Do not use italics, underlining, horizontal or vertical lines.
2. Include a keyword summary at the top of your resume.
3. Use the language of the job ad whenever possible to increase your chances of getting hits or matches.
4. Use a standard typeface such as Times, Arial, Optima, Futura, or Universal and use a font size from 10 to 14.
5. Avoid columns. Scanners move from left to right.
6. Avoid boxes and graphics
7. Keep the maximum number of characters per line to 65.
8. Use black ink on white or a very light color 8 1/2" x 11" paper.
9. Use only a laser-quality printer.
10. Remember to use plenty of white space even if it means your scannable resume is on more than one page. Place your name on each page.

FIGURE 8.7
Ten Tips for Formatting a Scannable Resume
Many people today will not open attachments from individuals they don’t know, you may decide to include resume to an employer as e-mail text or to send it as an attachment to an e-mail letter of application. Since the employer sees a fully formatted professional resume.

CHAPTER 8 | Portfolios and the Job Search—Getting Prepared

Tips for writing a letter of application/cover letter

Even if you haven’t written a letter of application, also called a “cover letter,” for a full-time position, you have probably written a letter of application for another reason, such as an internship, summer job, or part-time position. You should write a letter of application for each resume you mail. The purpose of the letter of application is twofold: First, you want to convince the employer that you are the best person to fill the position; second, you want to ask for an interview.

Tips for writing an effective letter of application

While a resume is essentially a fact sheet that summarizes your qualifications, a letter of application is a narrative that markets your candidacy by showing the employer how your qualifications match the job description. A well-written letter also gives you a chance to show your personality and highlights, or expands upon, particular accomplishments. It should be positive and persuasive. Figure 8.9 presents 10 tips on how to write an effective letter of application.

Organizing the letter of application

Most successful application letters have a three-part structure: a short opening paragraph; two to four body paragraphs providing evidence that you can do (or have done) what you claim, noting the benefits for the company; and a closing paragraph asking for the interview.

FIGURE 8.9
Ten Tips for Writing a Successful Letter of Application

1. Personalize each letter to fit the advertised needs of each company’s job description. Avoid generic “one size fits all” letters of application.
2. Know the job ad and respond specifically to what is in it.
3. Address your letter to a specific person in the company, if possible, rather than a department (i.e., Human Resources). Make sure that you spell that person’s name correctly.
4. Focus on the company—the “you” in your letter. Avoid using the first-person pronoun (e.g., “I”) excessively in your letter. Doing so gives the appearance of boasting.
5. Focus on how your skills set match what the company is looking for.
6. Keep your letter to one page but support your key qualifications with specific details.
7. Refer to your resume and portfolio in your letter.
8. Use high-quality stationery and envelopes.
9. Ask for the interview. Don’t be timid.
10. Edit and proofread several times. Like your resume, your letter of application is a writing sample.

Examples of opening paragraphs using these techniques.

If you decide to use a contact’s name in your application letter, let that person know that you are doing so. More likely than not, the employer will call or write to your contact for information about you.

Dropping a Name

Dr. James Smith, Professor of Professional Communication and Chair of the same department at Midwestern University, has informed me that Bancroft and Associates has a full-time position for a multimedia specialist. Please consider me an applicant for that position.

Using a Summary

Four years of courses in professional communication at Georgia Polytechnic, plus two summers interning at the Centers for Disease Control, have given me the knowledge and work experience needed for the entry-level writing position that you describe in the June issue of the AMWA Journal. Please consider me an applicant for that writing position.

Stressing Your Strongest Qualification

My knowledge of RoboHelp and FrameMaker, two of the required software packages mentioned in your ad, will help me contribute immediately to your software documentation projects. Please consider me an applicant for the user documentation position.

Tips on writing the body paragraphs.

Make it clear why you are interested in the company and the position. Make sure that the body paragraphs show (not merely claim) your strongest selling point, whether it is your education, work experience, or both. If you have limited related work experience, explain how your education makes you a qualified applicant. If you have relevant work experience, point out how key projects and activities that you worked on provide the skills that will transfer well to this new position. Demonstrate how you can help the company and how the company can help you. Tie your letter to your resume but avoid merely repeating the information there. Refer specifically to your portfolio, noting how the skills displayed there clearly match the job requirements.

Example

My portfolio shows my understanding of various designs for electronic and paper-based documents. Several of the graphic tools that you require are the same ones that I have used in my portfolio.

If you don’t have much related work experience, don’t be negative. Instead, try to compensate by focusing on more general character traits such as a strong work ethic.

Tips for writing the opening paragraph.

In the opening paragraph, state that you are applying for a position and refer to that position specifically by name. The letter should not seem to be an inquiry about a job or a request for information. In the opening paragraph, also indicate what reason or resources you used to find the position (e.g., a professional journal, Web site, career center, head hunter, newspaper, teacher, or work associate). If the employer has used a job identification number, include it. You may want to write your opening paragraph using one of these techniques:

- Drop a name.
- Use a summary.
- Stress your strongest qualification.
CHAPTER 8  | Portfolios and the Job Search—Getting Prepared

Example

You may consider it important that I earned more than 80 percent of my college expenses doing sales work during summer vacations. As my resume shows, I have worked as a successful telemarketer for three large Chicago-based companies. I have also done volunteer work for the March of Dimes, designing a brochure and several marketing pieces for fund-raisers.

Tips on writing the closing paragraph. The closing paragraph of an application letter has one function: to ask for an interview. Indicate your flexibility in regard to time, and make it easy for the employer to contact you, providing telephone numbers and e-mail addresses where you can be reached. Do not imply that you want an interview; ask directly for one. Figures 8.10 and 8.11 are sample application letters.

What not to say in your letter of application/cover letter

It’s just as important to remember what not to say in your letter of application as what to say. Figure 8.12 provides nine tips on what to avoid.

FIGURE 8.12

Avoid mentioning salary requirements.
Avoid using a negative tone.
Eliminate all grammar and punctuation errors.
Don’t commit errors.
Don’t boast; instead, focus on how you can help the company.
Don’t get too personal.
Don’t be long-winded.
Don’t be too wordy.
Don’t write an autobiography. Try to eliminate excessive use of the personal pronoun "I."
CHAPTER 8 | Portfolios and the Job Search—Getting Prepared

SUMMARY

Conducting a successful job search is hard work. Chapter 8 discusses how you can make this process easier by developing effective job-search strategies that help you match your career goals with special fields within technical and professional communication. The chapter also provides tips on how to develop a marketing plan, how to network, and how to write an effective resume and letter of application.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 1: Finding Career Information on the Internet

Using the Internet, locate five Web sites that provide career information for professional communicators. That information could include job postings, resume services, or any of the career information mentioned in Chapter 8. Write down the URL and a short description of each site’s content. Comment on the value of the information and prepare to share it with classmates or your mentor.

Assignment 2: Creating/Updating Your Resume

Update your resume or create a new one using one or more of the resume styles: (chronological, functional, combination) discussed in this chapter. To better market your qualifications, you will probably want to use more than one style, as well as a scannable version. For this assignment, your resume or resumes should focus on a specific career within professional communication (e.g., Web design, corporate communications, graphic design). In groups of three, exchange resumes and offer each other oral and written feedback.

Assignment 3: Preparing a Scannable Resume

Prepare a scannable version of the resume you created in Assignment 2.

Assignment 4: Writing a Sample Letter of Application

Write a letter of application in response to a job description. You might want to start by searching databases at your college’s career center, by responding to a print ad in a professional journal, or by using the Internet. Attach the resumes that you created in Assignments 2 and 3.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: CAREER RESOURCES, WEBSITES AND URLs

American Marketing Association (http://www.marketingpower.com)
American Medical Writers Association (http://www.amwa.org)
American Society for Training and Development (http://www.astd.org)
American Society of Journalists and Authors (http://www.asja.org)
America’s Job Bank (http://www.jobbank.gov)
Association of Health Care Journalists (www.healthcarejournalism.org)
Avue Central (http://www.avuecentral.com)
Careerbuilder.com (http://careerbuilder.com)
Careers at Yahoo! (http://careers.yahoo.com)
Computer Jobs.com (http://www.technicalwriter.computerjobs.com)
The Careers Organization (www.careers.org)
Elance (www.elance.com)
FlipDog.com (http://flipdog.monster.com)
Graphic Artists Guild (http://www.gag.org)
HotJobs.com (http://hotjobs.yahoo.com)
International Association of Business Communicators (http://www.iabc.com)
International Public Relations Association  
(http://www.ipra.org)

International Webmasters Association  
(http://www.iwanet.org)

Job Bank USA  
(http://jobbankusa.com)

Monster TRAK  
(http://www.monstertrak.monster.com)

Monster.com  
(http://www.monster.com)

National Association of Science Writers  
(http://nasw.org)

Newbie TechWriter  
(http://www.cloudnet.com/~pdunham)

Society for Technical Communication  
(http://www.stc.org)

Society of Environmental Journalists  
(http://www.sej.org)

Society of Publication Designers  
(http://wwwspd.org)

Technicalwriterjobs.com  
(http://www.technicalwriterjobs.com)

TechWriting at About.com  
(http://techwriting.about.com)

Techwritingjobs.com  
(http://www.techwritingjobs.com)

The Usability Professionals' Association (UPA)  
(http://www.upassoc.org)

Webdeveloper.com  
(http://www.webdeveloper.com)

The Write Jobs  
(http://www.writejobs.com/jobs)

Writerfind.com  
(http://www.writerfind.com)