

Carol Hoeniges

# It's Not Mark Twain's River Anymore

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be patient with the discomfort of the cast on my leg and with watching for Emma to appear from behind the security door. As if she had read my mind, she opened the door. I was face to face with a slender woman, probably of my age, full of energy. Her vibrant blue eyes were set off by brown hair. Her smile welcomed me, really made me feel that she wanted me there. It was the start of a beautiful friendship.

Two months later, Emma and I were sitting in adjoining cubicles, plowing through our respective writing projects. So far, I enjoyed the blend of work, particularly when it focused more on business topics. There was something about how the writing impacted people that really struck a chord with me. From past work experiences (many of them negative), I felt very capable of taking the employee perspective to heart and knowing the impact of policies on the individual and the work environment. Even though new to the company, I wanted to advocate for my coworkers. I wasn't just a tech writer who would write anything that anyone wanted. I often struggled with managers and colleagues to find just the right wording and to caution them against the impact of bad policy.

Emma was the only other tech writer on staff. Her position had evolved into an intriguing and challenging blend of writing, project management, software development, and negotiation with the owners of ARB. She was a techie at heart and extremely capable of taking on the programmers and engineers when it came to software design.

I looked over my shoulder to see Emma typing furiously in a Word document. She systematically filled the screen with topics, all organized in a logical hierarchy. How did she do that? I sat in silent amazement, then decided to ask her.

"How do you do that?" I asked, breaking into her feverish typing.

She rolled back in her chair, looking puzzled, and replied, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you can slam out a user manual faster than I ever could. You open up a blank document, set up headings and subheadings, and fill in the blanks with info you drag out of the programmers. Not to mention the fact that you're the goddess of Word and Doc-to-Help." I went on to tell her how I was even more impressed by her writing ability. She never let her "technicalness" get in the way of her end result: writing a user-friendly, reader-accessible document.

She hesitated, almost embarrassed by the praise. Finally, she said, "I'm amazed by your ability to build a story, to look at things from such a broad perspective while still nailing an idea right on the head. I look over and you're just sitting there in silent, deep thought. I used to think you were spacing out. But then you would start typing nonstop, and *voilà*, you would come up with a full story, thorough but without filler and BS."

She continued, "I think part of my speed on the technical side has to do with the fact that I actually thought about being an engineer. I spent one year in Iowa State's program. But it just didn't do enough for me, so I switched to English for my undergrad, which seemed to complement my music degree better. I focused on technical writing for a master's degree because it kept me linked with the technical side, but studying writing seemed to keep me creative."

I started to consider my own background and how it influenced me. I told Emma about how I realized, in hindsight, that Illinois State's program was very well

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suited to me. I was required to take not only technical writing classes, but also those involving rhetoric, composition, and literature. While others found the nine hours of literature painful and tedious, I welcomed them as an escape back to my happy place: the home of stories and artistry.

I told Emma how I had been surprised to be fascinated and profoundly affected by composition theories and how the concept of social construction showed me how I was linked to the larger world of community. I started to think about people and how they connect, and considering such relationships had a significant impact on the way I write. How do I live and move among various communities? How do I adapt my role within a specific cultural context? And, more important, if I do change to fit in with different circumstances, how does this affect my writing? Is it better? worse? How do I negotiate and navigate within the community to reach acceptance?

After intently listening to this dissertation, Emma started to talk about our similarities. "Even though my work at Iowa State didn't go as far into English studies, I think that you and I have the same sense of audience. We both take time to consider the people who will use and read our books. If we can talk to them, we listen to what they have to say and use that input in the final design of the manual."

From there we went on to talk about visual design, Edward Tufte, and William Horton. We had both studied design to some degree and were both drawn to the ways that the text and visual components of a document can work together. Emma also had work experience in applying her visual design skills to websites.

We paused, heady from our hour-long conversation about writing and communication, feeling mutually supported and appreciated. Yet over the next few months, this idealism began to fade for me. It didn't seem to get me very far on the software-related products. I quickly saw that although managers at ARB knew they needed tech writers, they didn't really know what to do with us. We were often brought in at the last minute, far too late to make any positive impact on a product. Little did these managers know how we (especially Emma) could help them with usability testing, with GUI design, with plain and simple logic. I, too, could have been particularly helpful in these arenas, ironically, because I didn't favor technology over people.

As I had done so many times before, I rolled my chair to Emma's cubicle.

"Emma, when you're done with that chapter, can we talk in the conference room?" She nodded, looking somewhat like a deer caught in headlights. I closed the door as we entered. The light blue walls seemed darker, the conference room smaller. Emma sat on the corner of the oblong table, making it very difficult to avoid her vivid blue eyes. "I'm quitting ARB," I blurted out with an utter lack of refinement. Tears welled in Emma's eyes. I picked at a spot on the table and then swallowed to remove the prickly lump that had formed in my throat.

"I have a job opportunity with a woman who owns her own consulting company in Normal. She needs a technical writer to work on a safety rule book, one who knows Quark. From talking to her, I think that I'd be better suited to the work ethic and environment that she has created. Her work is focused on helping people learn. Unlike here, she develops documents and training programs collaboratively.

She likes to think outside of the box for solutions." I paused, waiting for Emma to respond. Instead, she looked ill.

The silence deafened me, so I continued, "It is going to be hard for me to leave you. I've enjoyed working with you and becoming friends. I hope the friends part will continue. I just don't think I want to be a part of this business anymore. I feel undervalued because I don't clock as many billable hours as you do. The owners imply that my internal writing projects don't build the company as customer projects do. I'm tired of some programmers' attitudes, of being treated like a glorified secretary. They bore me, really. Not everyone is like that here, but you and I are never truly involved in product development. I want to be someplace where I can make a difference, where my work pays off. If I want to have 'real' value at ARB, or what they think is real, I will have to write software documentation, learn object-oriented programming theory, and immerse myself in GUI design. I would have to become a techie in order to stay there. Deep in my heart, that kind of change feels like losing something, something creative and personal." Again I paused, picking again at that spot.

With a heavy sigh, Emma composed herself. "I can't say I blame you, but this really sucks. I've been discouraged about the company's attitude, but I've always challenged myself to overcome their attitudes about gender and their myopia when it comes to software development. But I'm getting tired of it, too. Brian isn't happy at his work either, so we've been talking about our options. I really wonder what's going to happen here. I've been here long enough to want to stick it out. But on the other hand, this cavalier attitude they have in running the business worries me. Should I get out now or hang on? Without you here, the staying will be painful. But I really do support your decision. It sounds like the best thing for you. The woman you know—she's not hiring two writers, is she?" Emma tried hard to smile, but her heart just wasn't in it.

I had avoided him for the two weeks since I'd given my notice. I really didn't want to do this exit interview with him. And who knows what he would report back to the two other owners. Now was the time to decide if I was going to burn this bridge. The sight of the second owner, Suresh, approaching me broke into my thoughts.

"Are you ready for your exit interview?" he asked. As it was so often, his question was rhetorical. He really didn't care whether I was ready or not, so we proceeded into the conference room.

After speaking briefly about the commute and other choices I'd made for myself professionally, I decided to launch into some of the real problems I saw at ARB. Oddly enough, I was still hoping that he would take some of it to heart and make some changes. The prickly lump was back; I swallowed hard.

"I think that you underappreciate the contribution that your writers could make on your software projects. I'm fully aware that my experience is lacking on the software side; however, Emma's technical knowledge is significant, and she is still underutilized. We both bring user-focused perspectives that can add real value to the way the programmers do their work. But as long as they are allowed to sit in their cubes without contact with the real world, bringing us in at the end of development,

the software will continue to be nonintuitive for the user. It won't be the product you want it to be.

"There is a lot of talk around here of teams and teamwork, but it seems to me that it is just a bunch of lip service to an ideal that just isn't happening. Often, my role on the so-called team is to 'fix' something that the programmer already wrote or to do some kind of grammar magic. But Emma and I can bring so much more. We can help with logical thinking, project management, GUI design—I know you think I'm leaving because I'm unhappy and hate the commute. But in reality, it is because I don't want to spend every day frustrated at knowing that I could make a difference if only anyone else besides Emma cared. Until there is some progress in the way projects are managed and until you bring writers like Emma in early on, I'm not sure that things will improve." I trailed off to take stock of what I had just said and wait for Suresh to respond. He was surprisingly calm, looking at me with his caramel brown eyes.

After a weighty pause, he said, "It seems to me that you really just don't want to commute, that this has been hard on you. I wish you would have said something. With all the technology at our disposal, we could have fixed that, set you up at home."

Right, I thought, technology can solve everything.

He continued, "I think you could have learned from Emma more of what we do. It may have made more sense to you. But it sounds as if your new job is better suited for you."

His tone, more than his words, suggested that he meant I was leaving because I wasn't equal to the demands of a technological workplace.

"The pace here is intense," said Suresh. "We have to keep up with technology, to move forward. We don't have time to look backward."

At the risk of not looking forward either, I thought. I knew he was again dismissing what I had said, writing me off as someone who wasn't a techie and who was leaving for personal reasons. I wish I had that wasted breath back.

That was three years ago.

My husband has often said that I have the Midas touch when it comes to finding jobs. I found my new job by doing contract work for Julie while working for ARB. She owns her own consulting group, helping transportation companies build training programs and write documentation related to safety, health, policies, and procedures. When I said yes to the position, I didn't really know what I was getting myself into. I did know one thing for sure: Julie focuses on people; her energy and enthusiasm for the work were what I found intriguing and challenging.

I sit at my new oak desk without a cubicle in sight. Across the room, Julie is engrossed in a conference call with a port captain and a lead trainer for a major U.S. barge line. She is helping them develop a more cohesive and interactive training program, one that opens the lines of communication among vessel crews. I, on the other hand, am staring at the paper strewn across my desk, frustrated and confused. For the first time, I'm the lead writer on a manual for another barge line company, National Marine Transport (NMT). The book covers towboat operations, including

policies, procedures, and resource information. We call the book VOM, which stands for *Vessel Operations Manual*. We're using a team approach to writing, and I'm partnering with the project manager, a port captain named Dave. I leave tomorrow for our first team meeting, but I feel as if I'm missing critical information. Even though I've tried, I just can't find answers to the multitude of questions that I have about facilitating this meeting.

Still knee-deep in source materials and questions, I patiently wait for Julie to hang up. In the meantime, my mind starts to wander. Sometimes I almost long for those days when I could just be the introvert at the keyboard, generating text without much contact with the outside world. At least then I needed only to process my own thoughts. But that tactic didn't lend itself well to the consulting role that Julie expects me to develop. I was often so wrapped up internally that I would catch myself not listening. I missed or got only part of the information I really needed in order to do a good job of writing for my reader. Through the last three years, I had watched Julie for clues, seeing how she gathered information and listening to the questions she asked. While learning the writing style of the company and our clients (their tone, their voice, their jargon), I was forced to question how my evolving communication skills and background were compatible with Julie's already mature approach.

"Do you have some time?" I ask. "I need to finish planning my VOM core team meeting." Julie has finally hung up the phone.

"Where did we leave off from yesterday?"

"I was starting to tell you about who is on the team and possible options for the agenda that Dave and I have talked about. Should we start there?"

"Definitely," Julie says. "Tell me who you've got coming to the meeting and why they are there."

"There are going to be around fifteen people, if everyone shows up. From the boats, we've got two captains, two mates, three engineers. The mates know all the deck jobs; that's why we don't have any deckhands. From the office side, Jack, the compliance guy, is coming. So is Don from safety. We've also got two more port captains that work on training programs, in addition to their other work. Will is coming up from the fleet office in Cairo, Illinois. This will help since the fleet and harbor boats have different operations than the main line boats that run the large rivers. Overall, I think that Dave has done a good job of selecting a diverse group. The boat guys are all involved with the safety certification process that helps them become familiar with the manual. I think they will have some great insights.

"But I'm very stressed about my lack of experience in facilitating this kind of meeting. What if the team members resist being involved and jeopardize the whole process? How can I manage dissent and keep the process on a forward-moving track?"

Without letting Julie respond, I forge ahead in my anxiety. "I know that I need to accomplish two things early on in the meeting: I want the guys to realize that this is going to be an interactive, thought-provoking session and not just a sit-there-and-listen meeting. I have to find out what preconceptions they have about the manual and the project. For introductions, I'm going to have them partner with someone they didn't know or know well. After they introduce each other to the group, one of the questions I'll have them ask each other is 'How do you use the VOM? If you

don't, what do you know about it?' I'll have them write their answers on flip charts. To go a little deeper, I'm going to post two flip charts, one with the heading 'Positive' and one with the heading 'Negative.' I'll ask them to write down at least one specific detail, a positive and a negative, about what they know or think about the VOM.

"After this, Dave is going to give some background on the revision process so far. I hope that he can help the team understand why they are there and establish his authority as lead at the same time. He is going to keep it brief so that we can start working on the text. And this is where I get really nervous because I don't know what to do next. How will I know?"

Julie ponders, letting my stream of information soak in. "First let me say that I think your facilitation ideas are solid. It shows your team members that their involvement is necessary. As for your stress, I know you won't believe me when I say you're ready, but you are. Sometimes you have to let chaos happen, let ideas flow. In this kind of interactive process, you often take two steps back to move forward one. In the end, the answers surface, with the help of your team members. Plus, you have Dave and Don there to support you. They won't let you down."

"They won't let you down." Julie's words still ring in my head as I move to the back of the NMT conference room at NMT's headquarters in Paducah, Kentucky. The flip charts the team has produced in the first two hours of our meeting fill the walls around me. Gary, the chief engineer, has been grimly silent the whole time, other than occasionally mumbling something to his engineer colleagues. I wish that I had done something to mix up the seating at the tables. Those clusters of three or four at each table don't seem to be helping with whole-group interaction. The three stony-faced engineers back there look as if they are plotting a coup. "Let chaos happen," Julie had said. Well, it just might.

Dave's voice and the group's discussion sound distant. It's now or never. If I don't get Gary involved, our success as a team is in jeopardy. With my VOM in hand, I eye the row of chairs against the wall behind Gary. I meander nonchalantly, looking as if I just need a place to sit down with my big book. It isn't long before Gary mutters something under his breath. *Carpe diem!* I lean over and start talking to Gary's back. "What did you say, Gary?" I ask quietly.

Gary looks startled on one level, but oddly expectant on another. He hesitates. "I said that I don't think it is a good idea to move the text regarding engine maintenance and fueling to the section after cargo. That's all."

I wait for a pause in the group discussion. "Dave, Gary has some input back here on the sequence of that maintenance info. Gary, can you tell Dave more about it?"

Again, Gary hesitates. Is he going to move on it or not? My heart races. I know that this is a turning point. If I don't get him in here, the meeting will be a wash from the engineering standpoint. Maybe putting him on the spot was a bad idea. What if he totally clams up?

Gary shifts in his padded metal seat. As he starts to speak, I hold my breath, listening intently, feeling my tension begin to melt now that he is participating. He's looking at me for reassurance as he explains his reasoning.

Somehow, I manage to prompt him calmly. "That's a great insight."

He continues, and I can sense that out of the chaos, some order is emerging. What he is saying is rational, clear. The others are nodding; you can hear the jumbled pieces clicking into place. Obviously, Gary is really smart. These towboaters know their business! And big business it is; it isn't Mark Twain's river anymore!

Boy, Julie is on the phone a lot today. I should make some notes so that when I have her attention, I can plow right in, asking her about the VOM plan. It doesn't seem possible that a whole month has passed since the last meeting. Our next one is coming up in a couple of weeks, and Dave and I still don't have a full plan. How are we going to get the team members to tackle the content, to get involved with the writing and revision?

My reverie is broken by the sound of Julie hanging up the phone. "Do you have a few minutes to talk to me on this VOM stuff?" I ask. As she nods her head yes, I continue. "I talked to Dave today about our next core team meeting. We decided that we have to get the team members working the content. So far, they've only reorganized the document. Granted, the work they did was great. I never would have come up with that structure in a million years. I just don't know their jobs well enough. The only drawback is that they have moved around existing material without getting into an assessment of the content. I don't know how to get them engaged with all the company policies and work procedures. They just don't feel empowered or smart enough to do it, even though Dave and I know they are."

"Dave and I want you to consult with us on this, as a teacher of writing process. If you could lead the content review, Dave can work the small groups as content expert. I would be freed up to work the VOM as a writer, without thinking about leading the meeting. What do you think?"

"How do you think you'd use me in the meeting?" Julie inquires, munching on sesame sticks.

In my mind I assemble all the players in that NMT conference room in Paducah, and I begin to explain.

In the midst of the second meeting, it becomes obvious why Julie is needed and how she can work into the group dynamics. I glance in Julie's direction. Her brown hair flops forward as she scribbles feverishly in the draft of the VOM, taking "orders" from her five group members. They are hammering out nuances of rigging requirements. She is surrounded by two hefty port captains (one of them Dave), one young engineer (Todd), a manager of fleet operations (Will), and Jack, the compliance guy. My team is at a temporary standstill, having completed our content review of the maintenance and repair section. It seems best to check in with Julie to make sure that we are following the writing process. We are trying to accomplish so many things in our two groups that I am already worried about how to integrate all the information back at the office.

I get up from my table, the five "writers" in my group anxious for a break. I have driven the smokers into nicotine withdrawal! I walk across the room to Julie's very vocal table. As I approach, Todd is intently telling Julie something. "No. Pank,

Julie." Julie looks closely for any reference to *pink* in the rigging text. As she examines the book, Todd again says, "No. Pank. I said pank."

With an exhausted sigh, Julie gives up. "What are you talking about, Todd?"

With an understanding look and a smirk, Todd picks up the pink highlighter and gives it to Julie, at the same time taking away her yellow one. "Pank, you should be marking that in pank."

Hearty laughter breaks out at the table as we realize that Todd is speaking in the foreign language of the South. I can tell from Julie's soft expression that she appreciates his input. We had decided early in the meeting to mark mandatory work practices with a pink highlighter and recommended ones in yellow. This distinction is very significant to a worker's safety. Unquestionably, Todd is on his toes, invested in this task.

"How are you doing over here, Julie?" I ask. Julie looks up with tired but still intense brown eyes.

"Don't even tell me that you are done over there?" Julie says with a weary smile.

"No, we were just at a good stopping point. I think that I've pushed Danny over the edge! We finished maintenance and repair, groceries and supplies, reports and records, and have started critical response." I look at her text, trying to get a sense of her process. When she sees me looking over her shoulder, she comments, "I know this looks messy, but I think that I've made good notes about all their decisions. I'm using green to denote moving text from here to other parts of our new library structure. Blue means delete the text entirely; they've determined that it is incorrect or outdated. Does this look like what you are doing?"

"Yeah, you're getting into some real detail here. I think that is because you are working on the operating procedures sections. My team's sections just haven't involved as many actual work practices. Ours are more related to global policy, with informational text. That's why we're moving faster, I think. I was worried that you and I weren't editing and rewriting in the same way. But I don't think that is the case." I look up from Julie to find that her five team members are listening intently to me. Once again, it strikes me how involved they are in the process. They are listening to every word that passes between Julie and me, making sure that we are on the same path.

Julie questions me further on my progress. "I don't understand what you mean when you say that your sections are different than ours. I'm worried that we aren't engaging with the content at the same degree of specificity."

As I think about this, I look at my project lead, Dave. He immediately jumps in. "I see what Carol is saying. The type of stuff we're dealin' with here is very detailed because it's related to the work, to the operating procedures. Take this for example: 'Bridle slings, davit hoist, hoist block, and cable must all be in good condition and inspected prior to use. When the yawl is in stowage or on its cradle, use hold-down straps to hold the yawl in place.' The kind of information that their group is reviewing consists of more general statements, like those that involve company policy on keeping records current or carrying certain cargoes." Julie's puzzled expression tells me that she is still uncertain about the distinction that Dave is making. But,

true to the team process, she takes what he said to heart and seems satisfied that we know the VOM better than she does.

My team comes back from break, each one looking at their drafts and getting on the same page. Danny, a captain and a trainer, asks Gary what he thinks about moving all equipment-related information to one place, the equipment book of the library. After staring for a moment at the ceiling tiles, Gary says, "I think it will work, but only if we can determine what we mean by equipment." With his engineering straight-talk, he continues, "To me, equipment basically is something that doesn't breathe. A blue pipe is a water pipe. That doesn't breathe. A deckhand that is supposed to paint the pipe on a regular basis, well, that breathes and probably belongs in the procedures book instead. But I'm not sure that it can always be that clean cut."

As I listen to Gary talk, I again admire his clarity. It is clear to me how he has come full circle in this process. In the first team meeting, he was resistant and grumpy about his role. Now he is supportive of the effort but very clear about possible shortcomings. I like his honesty; you always know where he stands.

"So, how did you think the meeting went?" Using my blue Oldsmobile as an office, Julie and I use the five-hour journey home from Paducah as an opportunity to debrief about our work. Without hesitation, Julie says, "I think it went great. Exhausting but fun. I think that you and Dave picked an excellent time to bring me in for support. It was the right use of my writing teacher/facilitation skills, and it freed you up to be a writer. This meeting is also great for us as a company. It gave you an opportunity to shadow me on working a team through the writing process. This is great timing because you'll need to be working the teams once we start Central Railway's safety rule book next year. Before these meetings, you were growing as a teacher and writer. But now, you've really put that learning into action."

I laugh. "Well, I hate to admit it, but this meeting was fun for me. I was too nervous to enjoy the first team meeting, but this one was different. I could really see the process as creative. I found all the negotiating, problem solving, and communicating to be inventive and dynamic. It seems to bring people's involvement full-circle. I just really enjoy the guys. They are so genuine, so earthy."

I ask Julie, "Where do you want to eat? There aren't many options off this exit." Nothing sounds good to me. She offers, "How about Steak-N-Shake?"

I can see the red sign glow in the mist. Only a few more hours to home, then on to weeks of work at the keyboard. As I brake for the exit, I wonder, with a heavy sigh, if the mountain of vessel operations materials will tumble off the backseat. We had gathered a boatload of information!

Melissa Alton

## First Time Out

Melissa Alton graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 1996 with a B.A. in secondary English education. She is also a recent graduate of the technical communications master's degree program at North Carolina State University, where she concentrated on technical writing, web design, and human-computer interactions. Melissa currently works at IBM as a professional information developer. She also designs websites for nonprofit organizations.

I was a naively optimistic, headstrong girl when I left for college without a dime to my name. All I had to sustain me through four years of college was a dream . . . a dream to teach. Naive as I was, I believed that college graduation would mark the end of my angst and economic suffering.

Those days, weeks, and months were long. I paid for my undergraduate education by working twenty to thirty hours a week while taking fifteen to eighteen credit hours a semester. Back then I was a secondary English education major by day and a nanny by night. Life was hard. I was always tired. Outside of school and work I had no life; my only extracurricular activity was the Student North Carolina Association of Educators, of which I was chapter president during my senior year. My sustaining dream was to teach high school English after graduating from college. It took me four years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to earn my degree and teaching certificate. In those four years I went to a grand total of four campus parties, but I graduated with honors and I owed the university just \$3,000.

After graduation I applied for teaching jobs and obtained a position at a small high school in a little town in North Carolina. I was one of those people who went to college knowing exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I had always wanted to teach. Yet I taught for only nine weeks. I was shocked by the disparity between my preconceptions of teaching and the reality before me. During the first week of school, a fellow teacher's arm was crushed breaking up a fight. There were seventeen-year-old freshmen and thirteen-year-old mothers in my classes. There were weapons in my classroom. My students didn't need

*While grading the computer-based tests and providing technical support, I began to notice flaws in the writing of the test questions and in the design of the software itself. I offered suggestions to the owner of the company, and he liked my ideas. He asked me to write new tests, help redesign the software, and write an instruction manual for the test. I didn't know it then, but I was swiftly becoming a technical writer!*

a teacher; they needed a parent, a friend, a counselor, and a disciplinarian. I didn't want to be any of those things; I wanted to be a teacher. I called the parents of my students every night, hoping to gain their support, but most of them offered no help. The majority of them were not high school graduates themselves. One told me that when her kid was in my classroom, he was my problem, and I needed to learn to deal with him myself. When the principal of the school told her that if her son didn't behave in school, he would be suspended, she replied indignantly, "You can't suspend him. I can't be at home to watch him. He's the school's responsibility during the day."

My friends kept telling me to teach at least one complete school year before tossing in the towel. I committed myself to the semester. I thought to myself, "Surely I can last eighteen weeks." I was wrong. I developed an ulcer, I wasn't sleeping at night, I cried all the time, and my paycheck was too small to cover my medical bills. After seven weeks of teaching, I handed in my two weeks' notice. I lasted for one grading period.

Nine weeks after I left Chapel Hill, I packed all my worldly possessions and headed back. I had no money and no idea what to do with my life. What does a recent college graduate do when she discovers that her dream job is a nightmare? Well-meaning friends and mentors gave me suggestions. Some of them thought that I should become a substitute teacher or apply for a teaching job in the Chapel Hill, Raleigh-Durham area, where the students were better behaved and college oriented, but I was too jaded by my previous teaching experience to consider these options. I didn't want to enter a classroom as a teacher ever again. I still wanted to teach people, to help them learn somehow, but not in a traditional classroom setting.

Because I had no money and no job, but still had a lease in another town, I could not afford to pay rent, so I had to stay with friends while I looked for a decent job. A sympathetic former employer offered me a job as assistant manager in a department store; however, the pay was only \$6.00 an hour. I could never pay rent and buy groceries with so little income, so I kept searching. I was at a loss as to how to conduct a job search, so I went to a temporary agency. For somebody with a college degree but no experience, there were a lot of secretarial jobs but not much else. Since I was desperate for money and couldn't afford to be too picky, I accepted a job at a small software company for \$10 an hour.

My first day at the new job was a disaster. I stuffed envelopes all day long. I went home and cried my eyes out that night. I didn't want to stuff envelopes for a living. I needed to think long and hard about what I wanted to do with my life, but I was clueless as to what options were available to me. What did ex-teachers do?

Desperate for the income, I reluctantly went to work the second day and prepared myself for stuffing envelopes. But I didn't stuff envelopes that day, or ever again. The person I was replacing began to train me on the company's software. I was going to be grading computer- and paper-based tests and providing technical support to clients who didn't understand how to use the software. My job wasn't glamorous, but it wasn't stuffing envelopes either. I left fairly happy that day, and in the months that followed my job duties continued to grow and my position continued to improve.

While grading the computer-based tests and providing technical support, I began to notice flaws in the writing of the test questions and in the design of the software itself. I offered suggestions to the owner of the company, and he liked my ideas. He asked me to write new tests, help redesign the software, and write an instruction manual for the test. I didn't know it then, but I was swiftly becoming a technical writer! Soon I had so much work to do that the owner authorized an assistant for me. I hired a college student to come in several times a week. I wrote an instructional guide so she could follow the procedures that I was establishing for testing the software. We were still very busy so the owner hired another part-time employee to assist me. Within three months, I was not a temporary employee, but a full-time employee with a lofty title—director of certification, information systems—and I had two employees of my own.

Even though this wasn't a career job, I finally felt I had found a profession in which I was succeeding, not just surviving. I was there for only five months, but I learned and accomplished a lot in that short time. I wrote new tests, helped design new software, established and wrote a manual of procedures for testing the software, wrote an instructional manual for the test, and wrote a manual of office procedures for the company. I worked fifty to sixty hours a week and loved every minute of it. As a result of all of the overtime, I was able to save enough money to lease my own apartment in Chapel Hill. Unfortunately, the owner decided he didn't need my services or the services of my assistants once the tests were all rewritten and the new software was done. He fired all three of us. I'm happy to report that the executive director and many other staff members were not happy with the owner's decision to fire us, so they quit, right there on the spot. The company no longer exists.

Sometime during that five-month period, I had lunch with a friend of mine who was a senior in the communications department at North Carolina State University. I told him about my new job and how much I enjoyed the work I was doing. At this time he told me about technical writing. I had never heard the term before, so I asked him, "What is technical writing?" He told me that I was doing technical writing at work every day. He explained that technical writers write software and hardware manuals; instruction manuals for products, services, and processes; online help; text for webpages; advertising items such as pamphlets, brochures, and newsletters; newspaper and magazine articles; and so much more. He told me that technical communication covers business journalism, corporate communications, manuals, proposals, reports, white papers, press releases, grant writing, and so on. "Wow!" I thought to myself, "I am a technical writer. And I love it! I think I've found my new career. I am still teaching people because they are learning through my writing, and I love getting paid to write. Writing has always been a hobby of mine. I will need some kind of training in *technical* writing, though."

"How do you know so much about this?" I asked my friend. He told me that North Carolina State University offers a master's degree in technical communications, and he wrote a story about the program for the school newspaper. I've always wanted to get a master's degree and Ph.D., so after hearing my friend's sales pitch, I decided to talk to some professors in the program. I talked to the dean of the school and professors who taught technical communication courses, and I researched the

field on the Internet. I discovered that the state of North Carolina has three colleges that offer a master's degree in technical communication. Of those three schools, North Carolina State University's program was the most appealing to me. Every professor had a Ph.D., most courses were offered at night (so I would be able to work during the day and go to school at night), the curriculum matched my interests, the tuition was reasonable, and the school was only thirty minutes away. I decided to apply.

I had a lot of preparing to do in order to apply to the program. I would need to take the GRE, write an essay explaining why I wanted to be a technical writer, get three recommendations from employers and professors, get an official transcript from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill detailing my undergraduate work, and take an introductory technical writing course. I signed up for the GRE and began studying for it. I also started contacting technical writers via the Internet. I wanted to find out as much about technical writing as I possibly could and find a mentor. After completing these tasks, I was happy to hear that North Carolina State University accepted my application to enroll in spring 1997.

After the owner of the small software company had fired me without warning, I had to find a job, and quick. I had a lot of bills to pay, and the money in my savings account was running out quickly. It's difficult to save money when you make \$10 an hour and you're paying rent, buying groceries, paying an electric and phone bill, making a car payment, and paying back your school loan. Chapel Hill is an expensive little town! I called the same temporary agency that offered me the job at the software company, and they placed me at another assignment that same day. Unfortunately, they didn't have any technical writing jobs, so I had to settle for a secretarial job. It paid the same as my previous job, but the work was boring. I was miserable again. I decided that I would work there only until I could find a technical writing job.

Six weeks later I had a technical writing job . . . at least it was supposed to be a technical writing job! I was hired to develop and maintain a website for a small company. Unfortunately, I never got to touch the website. Instead, I was a glorified office manager of a library services firm. I worked fifty to sixty hours a week for little more than \$20,000. I did research, supervised four full-time employees, wrote monthly reports for the president of the company, took care of billing, and talked to clients whenever they had questions or concerns about our services. Some of this job was technical writing—the research and the monthly reports. I was also lucky enough to write a manual of procedures and design a new brochure, but the job involved a lot of work that was not technical writing: supervising employees, taking care of billing, and visiting client sites. After nine months, I was offered a promotion that would take me even further away from technical writing. The promotion would not be accompanied by a raise; nevertheless, I was told that if I turned down the promotion, I would not have a job at all. Already overworked and underpaid, I started looking for another job.

I interviewed with many companies for several months before accepting an offer. When I started looking for a new job, I was amazed by all the companies that wanted to interview me. I put my résumé on the Society for Technical Communication's

local webpage, and phone calls poured in. I received calls from companies that produced computer software and hardware, advertising agencies, universities, manufacturing conglomerates, industrial plants, contracting agencies, financial institutions, the local, state, and federal government, nonprofit organizations, engineering societies, magazines and newspapers, hospitals, and several Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies.

After much thought, I decided to accept an offer at a Fortune 1000 company that produces computer software and hardware. Now I work for a great company and have a terrific boss.

My current job provides me more than double my previous salary, great benefits, job duties that interest me, and a flexible work schedule. I design and develop webpages, perform usability studies, and teach others how to write effectively. With my flexible work schedule, I can work at home one or two days a week and take classes without worrying about whether or not my work will be affected by my studies. I'm learning new skills at work every day, and I have the freedom to pursue my education while feeling fulfilled professionally.

I still have dreams. It's not as though life stops with finding a good job and a satisfying career path. By the time this story goes to press, I will have my master's degree in hand. But I will not stop there. One day I plan to have that Ph.D. Just call me Dr. Melissa.

Alina Rutten

## How I Became a Goddess

In 1994 Alina graduated with an honours B.A. in French/English translation and a certificate in technical and professional writing from Glendon College (York University) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. After a year of searching for employment, she landed her first technical writing job at CADSOFT Corporation, a developer of CAD-based building/design solutions. While at CADSOFT she has been solely responsible for creating user guides, tutorials, training manuals, online help, demos, newsletters, marketing materials, and interface design. Although technical writing is continually challenging, she finds the profession very rewarding, especially with the recognition and respect she has earned from her colleagues at CADSOFT. Alina lives in Guelph, Ontario, with her husband, Ben, and son, Nikolas.



Dressed sharply in my best (and only) Liz Claiborne suit, I tried to breathe deeply as I waited for my potential employer to enter the room. Naturally I was very nervous. Considering that I was a new grad with no experience, it would be hard to convince anyone that I was the right person for the job. I had lost out to others many times over the past year, so my confidence level was shot. However, after so many disappointments, I had a fiery determination to claim this job as mine.

As I was silently giving myself the "I think I can" speech, a solemn, middle-aged man shuffled across the floor and sat down at his seemingly oversized desk. Little did I know that John would be a key player in my destiny as a goddess.

When he started describing the company, a software developer for the residential building industry, I became a bit uneasy. I didn't know much about building houses, and I certainly didn't know much about CAD. Naturally I didn't let this show, but I could see that this opportunity would be very challenging.

As the first round of questions began, I tried to mask my nervousness with an air of confidence and ambition.

*Half the battle was simply trying to understand what I was writing about. The program interface certainly left something to be desired, and my lack of building knowledge was a definite obstacle. Oddly enough, even programmers didn't have a complete grasp of their creation. To top things off, I had to learn RoboHelp and attempt to produce a user manual and online document simultaneously.*