



# THE ROAD TO BECOMING A TECHNICAL WRITER

Undergrad to a Fortune 500 Company

Olivia Garrett  
November 19, 2014

## Introduction

Aubrey Wood is a technical writer for Medtronic, a medical device and Fortune 500 company in Minneapolis. For Wood, the process of becoming a writing professional has not always been clear or smooth. From her Bachelor's to her Master's, to an extensive job search, her story illustrates the many steps involved in becoming a true professional in the field of writing and communication. Wood's path can be described in three main parts:

- 1) Education, Bachelor's and Master's;
- 2) Job Search and Transition; and
- 3) Career at Medtronic.

Education, job search, and career may seem like common and applicable steps for many recent college graduates. However, what sets Wood apart are the details of the experiences and skills she achieved along the way.

## Education

Wood graduated from Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) in 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts in Professional Writing and Communication. During her time at SMSU, she learned about design, theory, editing, and memo writing. Many of these aspects she felt gave her a leg up compared to other recent graduates with similar Bachelor's degrees. Like many do after receiving their Bachelor's, Wood decided to go to graduate school. She attended Auburn University in Alabama where she earned a Master of Technical and Professional Communication. She was eager to learn more about the field. Plus, she wasn't certain what type of career she desired quite yet. Graduate school gave her this time, and she gained experiences that would prove useful when she entered the job field.

While at Auburn, she taught Composition I and II, the university's core first year writing classes. If that wasn't impressive enough, she held the position as the editorial assistant for a mechanical engineering journal titled *The International Journal of Acoustics and Vibration* during her last year. Doing so involved reviewing article submissions, making publication decisions, and editing all chosen articles. During the summer months away from Auburn, Wood traveled to Korea to teach English to college students.

Graduate school, for Wood, was focused solely on professional writing, and many of the teachings were based heavily on theory. For many students, theory can be difficult, and Wood did not always see it in the best light. “In my opinion, many of the foundational texts from this field are so outdated, and out of touch with the real world,” she explained. This is one part of a larger, longstanding debate between nonacademic practice and academic instruction. An article about the practicality of technical writing explains, “These debates reflect a larger debate in American higher education, about the appropriate relation between vocational preparation and cultural awareness” (Miller 65). Wood experienced this tension first-hand during many of her theory-based lessons and classes that she did not always find applicable to the real world.

In general, Wood was not a fan of graduate school. Although she learned a vast amount about the numerous fields of technical writing and communication, the egos and politics of academia gave Wood a sour taste about her time in that kind of setting. This may be partly due to the culture of the Auburn English Department at the time. Regardless, Wood learned an immense amount during her time there. After graduating and earning her Master’s, Wood transitioned into the next stage of her life, which was searching for a job.

## Job Search and Transition

The transition between school and work, or academia and industry, can be a challenging time. For many young adults, the past 15 years or more have been spent in an academic setting. Wood, like many graduate students, had little time to spend applying for jobs because of the heavy workload during graduate school. After a three-week trip to Iceland, she was able to start applying for jobs.

The period of time when Wood graduated from SMSU wasn’t the best for recent college graduates. The United States was still in a post-recession period, which meant more recovery and fewer jobs available. According to an article in *Library Journal* about the realities of the job market in 2012, “A college education used to ensure a well-paying job, but now many first careers are on hold until the economy improves” (Easton 49). By 2014, when Wood graduated with her Master’s, the job market had improved significantly. Eager to begin her career, Wood dove into the search for her first full-time position.

She applied for approximately 100 positions, many of which she found on job ad sites such as Monster, Career Builder, LinkedIn, Simply Hired, and Indeed. It is easy to find jobs on these sites, but thousands of others are looking at the same ads on these sites too. This type of search is not always the best option since many large companies have recruiters and screeners or do not post open positions online anyway. After an exhausting month of applying and interviewing, Medtronic offered Wood a position. The job search process “takes a long time, is fruitless work, and pretty much is its own job,” said Wood.

Wood did not get a job at Medtronic through applying online, but by coincidence. Her manager happened to see her resume and brought her in. This further proves the importance of networking and making connections. It often takes an “in” with the company to see what positions are available. After interviewing for the technical writer position at Medtronic, it took a few days to get an offer and then a few weeks before she could officially start. All in all, it took Wood a month of hard work before the Medtronic position came along. Although she did use many job ad websites, Wood cautions, “Random internet applications may or may not yield anything. It all takes a lot of time, so budget time.”

## Career at Medtronic

After accepting the position, Wood began her career at Medtronic. To get an accurate picture of all her career encompasses, an explanation of company and position background, the medical industry, the company culture, her position as a technical writer, and the field of writing and communication is necessary.

### *Background*

Medtronic operates in more than 140 companies worldwide and employs 49,000 people. Because of their size and complexity, the company is broken down into several business units. One of those units is called Neuromodulation. Wood is a technical writer for Neuromodulation’s Integrated Design Solutions department. She is a member of the Technical Publications team who are responsible for product labeling of the Neuromodulation devices. Neuro devices include neurostimulation systems and implantable drug delivery products for chronic pain, movement disorders, psychiatric disorders, and gastro/uro disorders. Labeling for these devices can include manuals, patient information, prescriber information, or addendums.

## *Medical Industry*

Much of what Wood does on the job is defined by the industry in which she works. The medical industry is huge and complex. Wood describes it as a “highly regulated, quality-driven industry.” The work done in the medical industry, whether as a doctor or a technical writer, has the ability to impact someone’s life. That is why following proper procedures and ensuring compliance is such an important part of her job. The strict rules and regulations that govern the medical industry impact how Wood does her job day-to-day. For example, one of her current projects is to update the labeling to support a new type of therapy. A minor change to any of the documents could take months or even years. “There are so many forms to fill out, procedures to follow, and quality processes we must comply with,” explained Wood.

## *Company Culture*

Wood’s job as a technical writer is shaped not only by the medical industry, but also by the company culture at Medtronic. A typical day for Wood consists of anywhere from one to five meetings. This is common for many others at the company as well. Since employees at Medtronic work in teams and have several ongoing projects at once, frequent meetings occur to keep managers updated on the progress being made. Other meeting types include staff meetings, project team meetings, procedure update meetings, or training meetings.

Compared to many small companies, the setting at Medtronic is much bigger. The structure of the company is very sophisticated as well. For example, Wood claims to work with many different people, but rarely with anyone high up in the company. She does not personally know the CEO like someone at a smaller company might.

## *Position as Technical Writer*

A technical writing position at any company can be complex, but Wood’s is especially so. Understanding the position, the industry, and the culture at Medtronic was challenging for Wood. She was told the onboarding process lasts six to twelve months. Essentially, she had to learn how to successfully integrate into a huge, complex company. She had to learn about the project work, which is how her work is divided, the regulatory bodies and policies, work instructions, quality policies, and federal regulations. Likewise, as technologies change, so must

the medical industry and the companies within it. According to Wood, “As soon as one fully understands a process, it changes. So it’s a lot to keep tabs on.” Even though her work can often be tedious and extremely time consuming, there are great rewards.

Hearing and knowing how much the devices at Medtronic can change people’s lives is a reward in itself. Wood has been able to hear stories of those whose lives have been completely changed by a Medtronic device. She reflects by saying, “It’s easy to get bogged down in staring at a computer, navigating processes, and sitting in meetings, but it’s important to remember how the work actually impacts people’s lives.”

Even though her title is a technical writer, Wood does not do much writing and it is not a huge part of her job. Her focus is on making changes to existing documents, not authoring major pieces. For example, one of her primary duties is to work with the Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) Labeling Program Manager. This is done in support of a major labeling update for DBS therapy. DBS systems help control the symptoms of diseases like Parkinson’s, essential tremor, and dystonia. Although her position is not focused on writing long documents, like many would think of a technical writer, communication with employees and managers and making changes are key to Wood’s success at Medtronic.

### *Field of Writing/Communication*

A degree in the field of technical writing and/or communication, undergraduate or graduate, can take someone in a variety of directions. Wood managed to secure a job at one of the largest companies in Minnesota while one of her best friends with a similar degree works at a smaller company doing e-learning and research. Compared to Wood, her friend’s role in the company is more obvious and her work is easily recognizable. Her friend personally knows the CEO and even gets to sit in the cockpit of the company’s private jet. This is certainly not the case for Wood. The field of writing and communication is so diverse that a graduate can end up at any type of company in a number of different industries. In that, the positions that a graduate in this field can hold are endless. When speaking about her friends, Wood claims that none of her friends really understand what the other does because each position is so different.

## Conclusion

Wood has followed a path to become a true professional in the field of technical writing and communication. Her process, like many college students, followed three main stages. The first stage was her education, which included earning her Bachelor's and Master's degree. The middle stage was the time of transition between school and work where she searched for a job. The final stage is her career at Medtronic as a technical writer. Though these steps seem common, Wood found success in the details and experiences she encountered along the way.

## Works Cited

Easton Bonnie. "Career Reality Check." *Library Journal* 137.1 (2012): 49-51. Academic Search Premier. Web.

Miller, Carolyn. "What's Practical about Technical Writing?" *Professional Writing and Rhetoric*. Ed. Tim Peeples. New York: Addison Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 2003. 61-70. Print.

Wood, Aubrey. Personal interview. 28 October 2014.