

Finding work as an API Documentation Writer



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Overview

1. Why is API doc work desirable?
2. Which skills and abilities open doors?
3. Which traits and assets keep them open?
4. Where's demand strongest?
5. What's the work pay?
6. How can I get there from here?

- Andrew's context
- English major, reformed pre-med, recovered technical marketing writer
- 8 years as a software tech writer back in pre-history (late 80s to mid-90s) in Silicon Valley
- 24 years recruiting tech writers for SF Bay Area software developers, mostly startups
- Understanding of software engineering, medical devices, and hardware manufacturing. Little/no understanding of semiconductors, pharma, defense, finance

1 Why API doc rocks



- What exactly is API doc?
- What's different about API doc?
- Premium pay, job security, career growth
- More autonomy, better work conditions

- API doc explains how to use Application Programming Interfaces. APIs let software interact. Many modern APIs are RESTful (REST = Representational State Transfer) and are programming language-agnostic. Others are platform- or programming language-specific (most often Java, C++, iOS, and/or Android).
- API doc's basic component is reference documentation, detailing the endpoints, methods, parameters, requests and responses. But good API doc is much more than an API reference. It includes a) Overviews, b) Getting started, c) Authentication and authorization, d) Status and error codes, e) Rate limiting and thresholds, f) Code samples and tutorials, g) SDKs and sample apps, h) Quick reference, i) Best practices with the API, and j) Glossary.
- API doc differs from most other kinds of tech writing because of the material's technical complexity. Tech writers of API content must understand what software developers already know, what they need to know, and how best to address those needs efficiently (all w/o handholding from SMEs).
- There's no proven on-ramp to API tech writing, and it's challenging to gain the required skills and experience. Thus demand (dramatically) outstrips supply. Courses from Tom Johnson and Peter Gruenbaum, books by Anne Gentle, and programs from STC and Write the Docs all help, but without work experience small company hiring teams won't

- bite. When companies find the “right” combination of experience, skills, and attitude, pay rates soar and job descriptions prove to be mere wish-lists.
- I tell candidates: “if you have 80% of what the job post seeks, apply and EXPECT A CALL” There are no perfect fits, and the candidates with better credentials than you have probably don’t want the work (because they’re burnt out, won’t commute, or are incompatible with open-seating offices, Nerf wars, and RedBull-fueled marathons).

2 Necessary Skills



The more subject matter experience you have, the better. Technology knowledge consistently beats writing, tools, and audience experience.

- Read code
 - Install product(s) and set up a sandbox w/o help
 - Navigate OS' CLI
 - Master docs-like-code practices
 - Use static site generator(s)
 - Plug in to comms channels, meetings, Git, Jira
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- Read code of one or more modern, 'dynamic' (functional, object-oriented, imperative) programming languages, eg Python. Java, C, and C++ still count, but if that's all you know you're at a (slight) disadvantage.
 - Install product(s) and set up a sandbox w/o help; don't rely on a developer to set up your test environment
 - Navigate OS' CLI. Basic Linux command-line skills are almost essential.
 - Implement Docs-like-Code practices, and/or author embedded doc that's read and output using Javadoc, Doxygen, etc.
 - Use static-site-generation tool (eg, Jekyll, Sphinx, Readme.io, Developer Program Slate, Swagger, many others)
 - Integrate with dev team's comms channels (eg, Slack, Hangouts, etc), meetings, source control (Git), defect-tracking (Jira)

3a **Be Indispensable (a)**



If you're the geek that 'gets' the team, their product, and the audience - and who writes well w/o handholding - you'll prosper.

Earn your keep...

- Write code examples
 - Optimize the content toolchain
 - Measure your productivity
 - Make them look good
 - Get geekier
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- Write code examples — even if you're not a programmer and it's not the best use of your time, try
 - Optimize their content toolchain — seek ways to produce content faster, more reliably, and/or more broadly. If not already, get the content integrated with the company's source control tools (often GitHub).
 - Measure your productivity — create your own metrics, and (gently) publicize your improvements
 - Make them look good — getting lazy or feeling misunderstood are fatal
 - Get geekier — once you're known and trusted, dig deeper into the product & solicit ways to evolve

3b **Be Indispensable (b)**

Don't forget the Intangibles...

- Keep your word
- Listen carefully
- Show initiative in all things
- Generate helpful content quickly
- Never stop learning

- Keep your word — be on time, over-communicate, and don't over-promise. Minimize surprises.
- Listen carefully — engage SMEs, identify their priorities, find ways to help. Be low-maintenance.
- Show initiative in all things — be resourceful, ask well-informed questions, seek to advance their goals.
- Generate helpful content quickly — the sooner you produce, the happier SMEs will be.
- Never stop learning — this isn't your granddad's 9-5.

4 Where's demand?



Startups (esp. in the open-source space) realize doc sells product. All tech companies need dev doc; startups just need it more.

As a result...

- Onsite work often isn't mandatory
 - Pay rates are higher
 - Doc is often an army-of-one
 - Innovation is easier
 - Gratitude is greater
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- Onsite work often isn't mandatory — hiring managers 'get' that travel and onsite time is often unproductive (esp. in open-seating envts), and their teams are frequently distributed, so if you are known and trusted (and you produce what they seek) they'll permit remote work. Some will even agree to part-time (less than 40 hrs/week) engagements.
 - Pay rates are higher — open source startups understand that the doc has to achieve quick TTFHW (time to first Hello World) or the company loses a prospect.
 - Doc is often an army-of-one — it's rare to find more than one tech writer on the team, and even so there's usually no hierarchy
 - Innovation is easier — the main biases in terms of tools and processes are "simple, un-silo'd, and GitHub-ready"
 - Gratitude is greater — good work gets rewarded with more opportunities to contribute (aka "work")

5 What can I earn?



Dev doc pays better than other kinds of computer industry writing. It's only getting more valued, and is unlikely to get offshored soon.

Why the work stays stateside: California, in particular, is a magnet for technology startups. It's where founders and key engineers want to live, and where the venture capital infrastructure is strongest. The US is also the safest place to develop and host core intellectual property (IP) due to well-enforced copyright laws. For these reasons and others, core IP will likely stay in the US even though less-skilled roles will move away. (Let's not pretend that California-based tech writers are uniformly better educated, more technical, or more compatible with companies' cultures than those in Canada, Israel, South America, Eastern Europe, Asia, or Oceania.)

Why API tech writers rule: Fundamentally, API tech writers are essential for turning technology companies' IP into cash. In a real sense, content is these companies' product. Not only is doc, training, and support/consulting all an open-source company actually sells, but incorrect, incomplete, and unhelpful content is the quickest way to lose the trust of a prospective customer.

How much?: In 2019 experienced API tech writers can earn \$75-115/hr C2C on contract (the equivalent of \$60-95/hr W2) and \$130k-160k on staff/FTE as individual contributors working onsite (and without intermediaries) for SF Bay Area tech companies. That's up about 10% in the past 12 months for the most in-demand, productive talent.



Dev doc pays well

Dev doc work pays well, often lasts a long time, and tends to be flexible regarding location and hours/week.

 **SF Bay Area API doc direct pay rates**

	C2C (\$/hr)	W2 (\$/hr)	\$staff
Low	75	60	120k
Average	85	75	135k
High	115	95	155k

These data points are current as of 12/2019.

Direct pay rates = no recruiter/agency/managed services provider (MSP) commission involved. My intermediation lowers your pay rate on contract, but not for a staff role (where the recruiter is paid a percentage of your base salary once you've successfully completed 90 days on the job).

Synergistech seeks a 20% profit on contract and staff placements. For 1099-based contract projects, multiply the pay rate by 1.2 to calculate the bill rate (cost to the client). For W2-based contract projects, multiply the pay rate by 1.42 to calculate the bill rate (cost to the client). Why the difference? Because the costs of advancing the contractor's pay (for 30+ days until we collect from our client), covering employer-side payroll taxes, unemployment insurance, and various other types of 'employment burden', increase our costs by ~20%.

6 Getting there



You're not expected to be more than an 80% match for any job description. Demonstrate relevant accomplishments - and no liabilities - and they'll interview you.



Training

- ◉ Learn the tools (Markdown, reStructured Text, GitHub)
- ◉ Read Tom Johnson's [blog](#)
- ◉ Take Sarah Maddox's [classes](#)
- ◉ Check out Peter Gruenbaum's offerings
- ◉ Attend [TC Camp](#) and [TC Dojo](#) sessions
- ◉ Watch for relevant [STC chapter](#) and [Write the Docs](#) meetings

Here are Peter Gruenbaum's API documentation-related class offerings on Udemy:

Learn API Documentation 1: JSON and XML for Technical Writers:

<http://sdkbridge.cmail20.com/t/r-l-vdtjyud-jthdlteul-y/>

Learn API Documentation 2: REST for Technical Writers:

<http://sdkbridge.cmail20.com/t/r-l-vdtjyud-jthdlteul-j/>

Learn API Documentation 3: The Art of API Documentation:

<http://sdkbridge.cmail20.com/t/r-l-vdtjyud-jthdlteul-t/>

Coding for Writers, part 1:

<https://www.udemy.com/coding-for-writers-1-basic-programming/>

Swagger:

<https://www.udemy.com/learn-swagger-and-the-open-api-specification/>

Tom Johnson's 5+ hour API doc class (from 12/2018) is here:

https://idratherbewriting.com/learnapidoc/docapis_course_slides.html



Your Portfolio

- Put your portfolio online & link to it
- Prioritize “open-source” style API references and tutorials, not tabular/encyclopedic content
- Contribute to an open source [project](#)
- For portfolio advice, see this section of [my site](#)

Synergistech’s clients say they seek technical writers who can create content similar to or better than:

<https://www.dropbox.com/developers/core>

<https://www.dropbox.com/developers/sync/start/android>

<https://developers.box.com/oauth/>

<https://developers.google.com/drive/web/listing>

<https://developers.google.com/places/documentation/search>

<https://api.slack.com/web>

<https://stripe.com/docs/api#intro><https://stripe.com/docs/api#intro>



Getting to 'yes'

- ◉ Approach opportunities* via...
 1. Introductions from shared contacts
 2. LinkedIn profile updates
 3. Personal GitHub page
 4. Job board ads (but especially WtD Slack posts)
 5. Recruiters
- ◉ If you're a contractor never stop networking

* in descending order of usefulness

Synergistech curates a list of direct (not recruiter-intermediated) contract and staff content development opportunities around the Bay [here](http://j.mp/sfba-tc) (<http://j.mp/sfba-tc>) and encourages you to check it out, especially if our clients don't currently have any suitable opportunities for you. I update it daily.



SF Bay Area direct content-related opportunities:

<http://j.mp/sfba-tc>

Feel free to use this list, which Andrew updates daily, to find out who's hiring content professionals – Technical Writers, Content Writers, and everyone in between – around the San Francisco Bay Area. Hunt for the terms “remote” or “offsite” to find contract and staff/FTE roles that don't require you to work onsite.

If you're not local to the client's site, be prepared to travel there (at your own expense) for final interviews and/or kickoff meetings. Even if the role is fully remote, and even if the hiring team doesn't ask to meet you in person, offering to visit builds calms their fears and builds trust. Telework technology has come a long way, but F2F meetings always cement relationships better than online ones, and often lead to better professional trajectories.

*Finding dev doc work isn't hard.
Landing it, doing it well, and
staying sane is.*



Thanks!

Any questions ?

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- [linkedin.com/in/synergistech](https://www.linkedin.com/in/synergistech)



Credits

Special thanks to all the people who made and released these awesome resources for free:

- Presentation template by [SlidesCarnival](#)
- Photographs by [Unsplash](#)