

Dallas STC presentation on **Writing for Developers**
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Writing for Software Developers

Types of Jobs:

- a) Salaried, staff (mostly) onsite individual contributor tech writing
- b) Hourly, contract, onsite/offsite individual contributor tech writing
- c) Contract-to-staff individual contributor tech writing
- d) Toolsmith contract/staff role (implementing Swagger, readme.io, etc)

Deliverables:

- a) API reference guides
- b) Quick-start guides
- c) Developer tutorials
- d) Error messages
- e) Sample code (for cut-and-paste, fast "time to first hello world", TTFHW)

Demand:

- a) Strong and growing
- b) Lucrative (\$120-150k for individual contributor staffers, \$60-110/hr for contractors)
- c) Offsite-compatible
- d) Contractor-friendly

Real-world Requirements:

- a) Understanding of open-source software development process
- b) Some knowledge (reading, not writing) of a modern programming language (eg, in decreasing order of preference: Python, JavaScript, C++, Java)
- c) Insatiable curiosity
- d) Excellent listening skills (to gather info, but also learn about your audience's needs)
- e) Proven ability to explain complexity without simplifying it
- f) Motivated by earning the respect of introverted, inarticulate geeks

What happens when you apply to an API doc job:

- a) Your resume goes into a database called an ATS (Applicant Tracking System)
- b) An in-house or contract recruiter searches resumes for keywords. If you're lucky, they also eyeball it -- meaning scanning it for less than 10 seconds.
- c) Best case, the in-house recruiter shares your resume with the hiring manager
- d) Best case, the hiring manager responds to the recruiter with a "yes" or a "maybe" - so the recruiter calls you.
- e) The recruiter asks basic questions to make sure there's an approximate fit
- f) Best case, the recruiter schedules a phone interview with the hiring manager and other key deciders (typically colleagues and SMEs or department managers)
- g) Best case, the hiring manager tells the recruiter to have you meet more people (or discuss an offer)

Questions from the webinar topic:

Q: What's different about developer documentation?

A: Demand, compensation, independence, mobility, authoring and content-management tools

Q: What proportion of a typical dev-doc job posting's "requirements" is fantasy?

A: 20-30% are "nice to have" and "I've never met anyone with these skills", to say nothing of "I probably can't afford them if they even exist."

Q: Which skills are in most demand?

A: Swagger (a REST API framework), GitHub (a source-control tool), Markdown and ReStructured Text (simple authoring tools), Hugo, Jekyll, Sphinx, etc (static site generators, see <https://www.staticgen.com/>), and Python (a functional programming language).

Q: Where to gain directly applicable experience, often for free?

A: Open Data Kit project on GitHub (and 10s of 1000s of others all screaming for better doc). The goal here is to learn how open-source projects work, get a (human) reference, and build up your portfolio for when you hunt for paid work.

Q: How best to showcase relevant skills in your resume and portfolio?

A: See my site's portfolio advice here: <http://synergistech.com/portfolios.html>

Q: How to convince developers to hire and support you?

A: Log bugs against their code. Learn how their product works and make constructive suggestions. Improve (and not just edit) their existing content, error messages, and sample code.

Resources

1) **Open Data Kit contributor's guide**, created by Adam Wood, a recent Write the Docs presenter:

<http://docs.opendatakit.org/contributing/>

Open Source REST API documentation experience opens doors. In the past, you needed a software development background (and a Mac) to make sense of all the required software components and navigate the tools. This particular resource makes it all much more accessible, so I encourage you to use it (and even volunteer to contribute to the project)

The author, Adam Wood, is a tech writer and developer evangelist who is particularly proud of having creating the definitive (but always evolving) guide to helping contributors to his open-source client's project not only contribute to its documentation but do so efficiently. I was impressed. Compared to others, this contributors' guide solves the problem that stood in the way of many would-be tech writers actually sinking their teeth into an open source project.

Adam's presentation materials, they're here: <http://adam michaelwood.com/talks/plenty-good-room/>

For a hands-on crash course in Git: <https://github.com/cwcromwell/docs/blob/master/GitTutorial.md>

2) **Write the Docs** Portland conference presentations

Write the Docs (WTD) Portland 2014 videos: <http://videos.writethedocs.org/category/2/na-2014>

WTD 2015 videos: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkQw3GZ0bg1JvhaLqfBqRFuaY108QmJDK>

WTD 2016 videos: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmV2D6sliX3U03qc-FPXgLFGFkccCEfv>

WTD 2017 videos: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZAeFn6dfHpkBld-70TsOoYTOM3CaTxRC>

WTD 2018 videos: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLZAeFn6dfHplUgflOLEuHHAm1HdriyaZ7>

Write the Docs also has a [podcast](#), a [Slack](#) channel, and a [YouTube](#) presence worth exploring if you want to plug into that world more effectively.

3) San Francisco **Write the Docs** meetup:

<https://www.meetup.com/Write-the-Docs-SF/>

This 'chapter' now holds free events at Google in Mountain View, in San Francisco (at a variety of companies accessible by public transit), and in Berkeley (at the WeWork site). What's relevant to you is that most events are video'd; see the actual meeting 'conversation' for links to that material, or...

The SF Write the Docs meetup has a YouTube channel at

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAf1Yf22POwZaBWFIVHNPgA>

4) Tom Johnson's blog, **I'd Rather Be Writing**:

<http://www.idratherbewriting.com>

This is an excellent resource for relevant topics in modern software technical documentation. If nothing else, subscribe and read Tom's new posts, which appear 1-2x a month. His style is very accessible, and you can tell he loves this stuff.

Tom also has a free course on API documentation available here:

<http://idratherbewriting.com/learnapidoc/>

Tom speaks and writes regularly on API doc-related topics. I urge you to explore

<http://idratherbewriting.com/category-api-doc/> and digest his material. He's the trade secret of most would-be API tech writers, kind of like our two-legged Wikipedia on the subject.

5) Kristof van Tomme of **Pronovix**, developerportals@pronovix.com

Kristof is a dual resident of Belgium and London and a huge proponent of software developer portals -- essentially multi-function doc repositories for API developers. His newsletters, and tireless enthusiasm for API docs, are really helpful. The above email address will subscribe you to the material he circulates, usually videos of interesting Write the Docs presentations in London. He's the EU equivalent of Tom Johnson.

6) **Sarah Maddox**' REST API doc course (1/2016)

Sarah is the lead Tech Writer on Google Maps' API documentation, and has presented a number of free API courses in the SF Bay Area and elsewhere. Coursenotes for her January, 2016 iteration of this offering, which also includes info on JavaDoc and JavaScript, are here: <https://goo.gl/S58TuD>

7) **Peter Gruenbaum**'s Udemy classes for learning REST API documentation

Peter is a Seattle-based technical writer and owner of SDK Bridge, a company that creates API and SDK documentation. He's a former programmer and an articulate, patient resource for API tech writers. His five (and counting) online classes on Udemy.com are an excellent first step for those seeking to learn the ropes. They're inexpensive, often discounted, and worth your time:

[Learn API Documentation 1: JSON and XML for Technical Writers](#)

[Learn API Documentation 2: REST for Technical Writers](#)

[Learn API Documentation 3: The Art of API Documentation](#)

Coding for Writers, part 1: <https://www.udemy.com/coding-for-writers-1-basic-programming/?couponCode=ANDREWDAVIS>

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

8) **TC Dojo**, run by Liz Fraley of Single-Sourcing Solutions

TC Dojo is an informal service for technical writers trying to stay current with their craft. She's the consummate researcher, very well-informed and -connected, and very generous with her insights. She also founded and helped run TC Camp, an unconference for tech writers now in its 5th year. She often (but not exclusively) covers topics related to API documentation.

Subscribe to TC Dojo's [YouTube](#) channel here: <https://www.single-sourcing.com/join-tcdojo/>

TC Camp info is available here: <http://www.tccamp.org/>

9) **Books on REST API doc** that won't waste your time:

- a) [Docs Like Code](#), by Anne Gentle (Cisco Systems, Austin, TX)
- b) [Modern Technical Writing](#), by Andrew Etter (ex-Palantir, Palo Alto, CA)

10) **Contribute documentation to open-source development projects** to develop real-world portfolio samples

Many open-source projects lack useful documentation, but don't have the budget to pay someone to create it. By donating time and effort to their cause, you'll gain a) real-world experience, b) a reputation for initiative, and c) one or more third-party references who can testify to your effectiveness. A good place to look for interesting open-source projects is:

<https://opensource.com/open-organization/17/6/documentation-feedmeradmes-project>

and

<https://help.github.com/articles/finding-open-source-projects-on-github/>