

## Career Profile

### Brendan O’Driscoll, Technical Writer (Vidyard)

By: Afreen Khan, Outreach & Support Peer



Brendan O’Driscoll graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in history from Wilfrid Laurier University in 2013. Later, Brendan decided to attend graduate school and complete a Master of Arts in History from McGill University. During his time as both an undergraduate and graduate student, Brendan worked for a professor at the Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies. Brendan says this experience was invaluable as he conducted research in libraries and archives, participated in speaker series, managed several research projects and acted as a tutor for other students.

Gradually, Brendan entered the writing industry, first by working as a Digital Records Project Assistant for the City of Waterloo and then as a Content Writer for Innovate Development, an online platform that promotes innovative approaches to global problems within the field of international development. His role there consisted of writing a series of short articles that explored positive solutions to significant environmental challenges. It also motivated him to branch out and complete an online certificate in technical writing as well as work for Sun Life Financial in a customer support role for approximately seven months. With this combination of experience, Brendan entered the software industry as a Technical Writer at Vidyard, a B2B software company that aims to help businesses succeed through the strategic use of online video.

Brendan describes the culture at Vidyard as fast-paced, dynamic and very open. When Brendan first started, he did not consider himself highly technical in terms of software knowledge and coding, a challenge he overcame by researching concepts, asking lots of questions and by approaching the job with curiosity and a willingness to learn. His day-to-day responsibilities consist of working closely with Vidyard’s product and development teams in order to understand how the software works, what requirements are needed to use it, and how changes to the product might affect its existing functionality and workflows. Brendan then designs and writes online documentation that explains how the product works and what customers need to know in order to use it. He carefully considers the information that should be communicated—what needs to be told, to whom, as well as how it might best be presented (whether through text, images, video, or a combination of tools). Brendan notes that good documentation starts from the ground up: it is important to fully understand your topic (the product) first and then ask questions before commencing with the writing process.

According to Brendan, technical writers require strong communication and critical thinking skills as well as an ongoing willingness to learn. Even though strong written communication is an important component of the job, Brendan indicates that critical thinking is imperative in order to analyze problems from beginning to end and determine how new software features affect the product and customer experience. Similarly, strong communication skills are necessary in order to convey information in a precise manner and ensure that others understand the written material. Moreover, an ongoing willingness to learn is a significant aspect in technical writing. Every day presents a new challenge as software features are constantly being improved through updates. A continued commitment to learn about coding and software development in his free time has helped Brendan throughout his role as a technical writer.

The qualifications and training required to enter the field of technical writing depend on the company to which you are applying. For example, in Brendan's experience, he states how a technical writing certificate or accreditation is not necessarily needed to become a technical writer; however, it may help you distinguish yourself from others in the field as it showcases interests and knowledge of the profession. When applying for a position, it is important to communicate how experiences on your resumé relates to writing and the skills needed to communicate complex and technical ideas. The ability to demonstrate your willingness to learn and to communicate how your existing experience translates into an on-the-job skill set will play a huge factor during interviews. It is also worthwhile to learn about technical writing by talking to others in the field. Brendan recommends taking time to research different kinds of technical writing jobs, to engage and ask questions at networking events, and to build a network of contacts through the Society for Technical Communication or other professional forums.

As technology becomes an even more important and growing industry in Canada, there will always be a need for technical writers. It is important to do research on each company of interest. For example, Brendan describes how some companies may be highly technical and require someone who has a strong background in math, physics or other hyper-technical knowledge in order to communicate the correct and necessary information to customers. Some of those jobs may even require schematic and diagram design skills. However, there are other companies, such as software, where the required level of technicality can be learned. Similar to Brendan's experience, he was able to make the case where his critical thinking and written communication skills were strong, and that technical knowledge would follow quickly thereafter.

Growth in the technology industry is never-ending. At larger, established companies there are multiple levels of technical writers, junior to senior. And in others, like Vidyard, there is much room for growth, not only in terms of the responsibilities of Brendan's current role, but also in terms of different roles within the company itself. Brendan states that it's common for someone in his position to move to other teams, such as a Solution Consultant team, if they show willingness and have enough experience. Moreover, smaller companies have a lot of fluid, cross-roll growth whereas larger companies may have more vertical, junior-to-senior growth. Brendan states that it's important to acknowledge that software is not only a technical industry. He says, "hardware needs schematics and designs". As well, any company that produces instructions needs a "technical writer", such as toy companies, manufacturers, home appliance companies, and the medical industry. It's important to understand when researching the field that not all technical writing roles may have the title "technical writer". Professionals in this field may be called "document specialists" or "specification writers", to name a few examples of job titles.

To acquire technical writing experience as a student, consider applying for any opportunities that involve writing and communication. As well, students should get involved early in extracurricular activities on campus; for example, writing for The CORD or participating in research. It is beneficial to seek out opportunities where you can combine communication, writing, and digital technology in order to help posture yourself toward a career in technical writing.