

Ask a WRTC Alum

Last updated April 22, 2015

Job Search

What kind of careers for WRTC grads are out there?

I initially narrowed my job search to subjects I was interested in like publication and design. I also searched for technical writing positions because I thought my degree was best suited for those roles. This was a good start, but I had no idea how many other career options were available. I knew there were for-profit and not-for-profit companies, large corporations and small businesses, but I had never heard of association work. When I opened my job search to the ASAE (American Society of Association Executives) website, I learned there was an association for just about everything: professional writers, medical schools, and used car dealers. In association jobs, there is a lot of flexibility in the kind of projects you may work on. In my role with my last association, I got to dabble in magazine article writing, direct marketing emails, and online education course design. I also did a lot of not-so-glamorous things like stuff envelopes to all of our 800 members each month. Small non-profit associations usually mean you work in an environment that is under-staffed, but if you're working for a cause that you really believe in, it's worth it. Now I work for a major medical association in Washington, D.C. where I get to work on a print and online publication and work directly with pre-med students.

–Nicole Lee, JMU '09 & '11

Law school is one option, albeit one with risk and expense. After graduating from JMU, I worked for several years as a paralegal to prepare for law school. Writing, as you can probably imagine, is important for lawyers. The writing program at JMU drew out my affinity for and curiosity with writing, characteristics that developed throughout my time in law school and currently in practice (no comment whether they have aged like a fine wine, though). If you truly enjoy writing--meaning, the craft of writing, the self-and-peer-editing process, attempting to persuade others through the written word--then the legal field can be a rewarding one, under the right circumstances. Those circumstances depend almost invariably on the individual considering taking the plunge, and I am happy to discuss in greater detail my experience to help others.

–Garrett Hooe, JMU '06

What tools did you use to job search?

I started job searching using Indeed.com and Monster.com. I also searched for and followed some professional organizations on Twitter that posted job announcements regularly. When I didn't have a job offer a month after graduation, I reached out to some of my former colleagues from an internship I had during the summer before my senior year. One of my fellow interns told me she had just accepted a full-time position where we interned together in Richmond, VA, and another sent me a link to a job that had recently been posted at her association in Washington, D.C. I ended up getting that association position and moving to D.C. a few weeks later. I can't overemphasize the importance of making professional connections with other people in your field. It's wise to stay in touch with those former colleagues because a friend you meet during a summer internship could become your colleague a few years later.

–Nicole Lee, JMU '09 & '11

What advice do you have for college students?

Don't pigeonhole yourself into a particular niche too early. There are so many options out there! Don't be intimidated by new technologies or topics that you are less familiar with. I remember shutting down when I couldn't figure out how to use Photoshop for a project during my junior year at JMU. I wish I had asked for help or just googled the questions I had – there are so many free YouTube tutorials available! If you can train yourself to be a life-long learner now, you'll be more confident taking on new responsibilities as a professional. A lot of the opportunities that have opened up for me have come up because I've said that I was interested and willing when someone else was apprehensive.

–Nicole Lee, JMU '09 & '11

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Is a Ph.D. right for me?

This is a question you might be considering as you approach the end of your time as a Master's student in WRTC (or, in some cases, your Bachelors), and there are a variety of articles debating the merits of graduate education, especially in the current economy. However, as a graduate of a program such as WRTC, you're uniquely situated to pursue opportunities in the realm of technical and professional communication or to pursue a more in-depth theoretical understanding of the ways in which we use writing to mediate activities in our daily lives. There are several considerations to take into account when making this decision.

First, what are you curious about? It sounds like a simple question, but the heart of graduate work at the doctoral level is curiosity, and that curiosity is what will sustain you over the months and years devoted to pursuing a Ph.D. So, take count of what interests you, whether that is "How do individuals gain literacy?" or "How does written discourse within the sciences and medical professions mediate the construction of knowledge?" or even "How has writing continued to develop and evolve with the implementation of wide-spread digital networked technologies?" The questions are nearly infinite, but it's important that you're curious. No one (or at least no one I know) starts a Ph.D. knowing exactly what their dissertation will investigate, so don't panic if what interests you is still framed broadly.

Second (and this is a little more subjective), do you like teaching? In many advanced fields, teaching isn't necessarily what fuels the research agenda of a discipline, but there are several possibilities coming out of WRTC. You might pursue a Ph.D. in technical communication, professional communication, composition studies, rhetoric and composition, design, or any number of an amazing assortment of hybrid programs that are rapidly dotting the higher education landscape. WRTC itself represents such a hybrid model, so you already can see the diverse range of interests you might choose to pursue. In most, teaching will play some role, whether that is teaching introductory first-year composition courses, or specialized writing-in-the-discipline modeled technical/professional writing courses to an assortment of undergraduate majors. In my case, teaching has fueled my interests and provided a lot of the research questions that motivate my work. Regardless of specialty, communication and writing play a large role in WRTC and the sub-fields I've described here, and you'll likely be stepping into the classroom. And you'll enjoy life as a Ph.D. so much more if you truly enjoy teaching rather than viewing it as a burden.

Third, are you self-motivated? No doubt, the best programs have a lot of support inherently built into them. The faculty you work with are the greatest resource and asset you'll receive as a doctoral student. Information can be located, found, or researched in any number of ways, but a strong faculty body can help ensure that you've got the support system in place to make sure you aren't "reinventing the wheel." Nevertheless, a lot of the work you'll be doing will rely on intrinsic motivation--you'll be expected to engage in scholarly activities, to engage in research, to teach, to engage with theories, and the biggest parts of the journey (preliminary/comprehensive examinations and the dissertation) require a wealth of self-motivation to make sure you don't get stuck or simply start procrastinating away responsibilities.

In the end, though, if you've got the kind of curiosity that has you considering a Ph.D. then the struggle is well worth the effort. There are high and low points as with just about any other employment option in life, but if you're passionate about some aspect of the field, then devoting the time to develop your expertise and join the scholarly conversation is its own reward.

–Bret Zawilski, JMU '11

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Job Interview

What's the craziest thing that's ever happened to you in an interview?

In my current job, we have a few tricks that we use to test the on-the-spot critical thinking skills of interviewees. During my interview, my now-boss asked me three brain teaser riddles. For example, "How many ping pong balls can you fit into a school bus?" The answer is there is no answer, you're supposed to ask a follow up question. Something like "How big is the bus?" or "All the way filled or just to the tops of the seats?" Pretty much anything that shows that you're not just answering the question and you're actually thinking about it.

We also use this task called "The Jar of Whimsy." We give them a jar of random stuff from our desks: pens, paper clips, toys, chewing gum, USBs, scissors, ketchup packets, etc. Then we make them dump the jar out, organize it, then explain to us why they organized it the way they did. Was it by color? Shape? Function? Edible? It's a way for us to see how they think through things before completing a task. Again, no right or wrong answers, it's more of an observation activity.

Moral of the story: anything can happen in an interview and both of these definitely took me off guard. Do some research on the company ahead of time to see what kind of culture they have. Though not always, a more laid back, relaxed company might have a more laid back, relaxed interview process and may throw out something crazy that isn't just a simple question and answer format.

–Christy Chilton JMU, '10 & '12

How do you rock an interview?

Before every interview, I caught myself googling "Interview tips". No matter how much you plan, interviews can be nerve-racking because you don't know exactly what kind of people you are going to meet or what to expect. I saw a TedTalk that said you should go to the bathroom and stretch your arms in a victory pose to rev up your body before the interview begins. That's not always an option, but I do think it's important to be kind to yourself. Remember, if you're being asked to interview, you've already made a positive impression! My advice is to know it's okay to brag a bit, and don't be afraid to repeat things that are already listed on your resume or cover letter. Don't assume everyone in the room has even looked at your resume! Also, be ready to talk about specific examples where you have excelled and specific ideas you have for projects you may work on at this organization. Now that I've been on the hiring side, too, I think a memorable story goes a long way when remembering and comparing different candidates. Also, I think it's good to have a couple of questions prepared to ask your interviewer, but make sure they are questions that you genuinely care about. Asking questions for the sake of questions may come across as insincere.

–Nicole Lee, JMU '09 & '11

What kinds of questions should I ask the interviewer?

You are interviewing a company as much as they are interviewing you. Come prepared with a list of questions to ask at the end of things you want to know more about the company or the team you're applying for. What does a normal day look like? What would my responsibilities be? What is the culture of the company? What do the vacation policies and benefits packages look like? (Fair warning: be careful asking questions about time off, vacations, salaries, etc. There is room for very general questions but try not to take away from the fact that you're also interested in the job, not just what the company can provide for you in terms of other incentives.) Make sure the company, the team, and the managers are going to be a good fit for you as well as you for them.

–Christy Chilton, JMU '10 & '12

What is the best way to prepare for situational interview questions?

The interview format for my current job is all situational questions. The ones that start "Tell me about a time when..." or "Give me an example of how..." They make you describe a situation and then show how you handled the situation. These are always very difficult to prep for because they're usually very general but you

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have provide very specific examples that detail how you solved a problem. It gets even more difficult when the answer to the question is either going to be a negative situation or negative solution and doesn't always paint you in a good light. Having interviewed recently with this format and conducted a few interviews recently in the same format, I thought a few prep tips would be beneficial.

The best course of action is to come up with a few solid examples that can be worked into different situations. Think about times where you had a big project or were part of a team. What role did you play? What went right? What went wrong? Where would you make improvements for next time? What kind of communication do's and don'ts took place between you, your teammates, or the person in charge of the project? Write these down. Having them fresh on your mind will help bring them up quicker when you're in the interview.

Make sure to give an overview of the project and your role in the project at the beginning so the interviewer has some context in which to evaluate the answer to the question. Keep it short and sweet. They don't need to know the day by day breakdown of the project. Give them just enough to understand what the project entailed and your general responsibilities on the team.

There are some standard situational questions and a lot of companies use these broader questions so they can apply to multiple situations. Google a few and practice coming up with answers to some of the more popular ones. Again, you'll never be able to fully prepare for the exact questions they're going to ask, but thinking of examples ahead of time and practicing with some general ones will put you way ahead of the competition. And yes, it is noticeable when you've prepared well for these types of interviews.

–Christy Chilton, JMU '10 & '12

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Accepting a Job Offer

Is it ever okay to turn down a job offer?

Yes. Thinking critically about job opportunities does not mean that you're set in stone after you apply and interview. The conventional wisdom goes something like this: If you weren't going to accept the job, you shouldn't have applied. But that thinking begs the question (i.e., assumes the conclusion it is trying to reach) because it does not consider that one's mind may change *because of* the interview process. While it may not be wise to outright declare during a job interview "I'm interviewing you just as much as you are me," candidates doubtless owe it to themselves (and the prospective employer) to take a hard look at whether the culture, responsibilities, and other factors are right for them. Often this is difficult to determine over the internet or exchanging emails. As a prospective employee, consider your values and goals once you have obtained as much information you can. If your decision changes after you've interviewed, that's cool.

–Garrett Hooe, JMU '06

How do you negotiate salary?

No matter how excited you are when that first offer finally comes, do not feel obligated to accept a job on the spot! Getting the offer is very exciting and you may feel tempted to accept right away, but you need time to evaluate the offer privately. Thank them and tell them you look forward to reviewing the formal offer, but let them know that you need a couple of days. After you've had a chance to research the cost of living and compare the full benefits package, you may be comfortable asking for a bigger salary. Make sure you understand how the salary is determined. Where I work, everyone is placed into a certain bracket with a salary range depending on the job description, and you start at a certain percent within that range depending on your qualifications. After I reviewed that, I pointed to some specific examples in my background that I believed should place me at a higher percentage. If increasing the salary isn't an option, there may be other things you can negotiate depending on the offer.

–Nicole Lee, JMU '09 & '11

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On the Job

What does a typical work day look like?

I work for an association that is responsible for everything from developing the MCAT exam to accrediting medical schools and increasing diversity in medicine. I work on the pre-med side of things specifically on a print and online publication for pre-med students. My typical work day begins at 8:30AM. I check emails, review my meeting schedule, and organize my to do list to plan out my day. It depends on what stage we are in in our publication season, but I may review a draft of a chapter from an internal writer, or a mock-up of our cover from our layout and design team. I regularly follow-up with medical schools and remind them to update and maintain their medical school profiles. I also help review and edit content for our pre-med blog, Ask a Med Student video series, and inspiring stories library. Depending on the week I may be collaborating on an upcoming webinar or outreach project as well. I'll usually spend a couple hours each week reviewing and updating content on our web site. I may have a meeting with our marketing team to update our promotional materials, or I may have an academic affairs staff meeting to talk about changes in academic medicine that impact our constituents: pre-med students, medical students, medical school admissions deans. I try to wrap up work around 4:30 since my association encourages a work/life balance where we are only required to work 35 hours/week, but sometimes I need to work later than that. On a non-typical day, I'm traveling to a pre-med conference to give presentations and speak with medical students, advisors, or admissions deans.

–Nicole Lee, JMU '09 & '11

What if you don't get along with your boss?

Try to put yourself in your boss's shoes. It's often hard for an employee to see the boss's perspective. In my experience, I've gotten caught up in the day to day difficulties and stresses and I use to find it disappointing when my boss "wouldn't do anything about it." That was my perception. It wasn't until I took a leadership class that I learned that supervisors often see things from a high level perspective and how things will affect the company or team a whole, not necessarily focusing the difficulties "down in the weeds." So even though it appeared she wasn't fixing the issue, she was resolving it from an overall impact view.

Your supervisor may also be a different personality type. Maybe you're more emotional and concerned with your interactions with people, and your supervisor is more analytical and focused from a process perspective. I think it's important to recognize the differences you may have, but try to work through them. Be honest with him or her and express your concerns in a professional manner. Most likely, he or she will be thankful for the feedback and respect your honesty.

–Lindsay Cannaday, JMU '09 & '11