Rebekah Frederick, a 28-year-old technical writer for NASA, begins her day by waking to the hungry wailings of her cat, Lupe. Ever since Rebekah began working from home, Lupe has become her constant office companion, often lying behind the monitor and playing with the computer power button. After Lupe is fed, Rebekah grabs a cup of coffee and something quick for breakfast before going to her computer to clock in. Computers are the main tools of her profession, but a tool is only as capable as the user. Rebekah’s experiences and skills make her quite capable, which is why she excels as a technical writer.

She splits her work time between two types of tasks which she calls “short-term deliverables” and “long-term deliverables”. The long-term deliverables are the more design-
based tasks, such as making PowerPoints, creating booklets, and editing team reports. The short-term deliverables are the tasks that come up suddenly in her day-to-day work, such as reviewing a coworker’s paper before they submit it or answering a coworker’s question. Her workload varies from day to day, but often consists mainly of editing, creating content, and collecting information. This work can be mentally exhausting, so during her day she takes advantage of being at home during the day and fits in time for brief moments to mentally cool down. These moments can involve having a snack, taking a walk, or doing a household chore. “I guess I portion my day up into more bite sized pieces than I would if I were at the office,” Rebekah explained. Since much of her work, such as editing, has her focused for long periods of time, the mental breaks help with her concentration. She handles her work at her preferred pace, adapting to change as it comes, much like she did in the past.

Rebekah’s journey into the technical writing field was not a straight path. For a time, she hopped from major to major. She started in healthcare before moving to the culinary field, and then she finally settled into a music major at UAH. However, during her time in the music major, she developed a shoulder injury which, as a violinist, limited her goals of pursuing a lucrative music career. Unable to continue with her music goals, she turned her focus towards her interests in writing, which eventually led her to pursue technical writing. She was attracted by the many job prospects the field offered and by the type of writing itself. She explained that “I am a little bit more of a concrete person than an abstract person so I was really drawn to the idea of working on something technical.” She continued by saying that, “there’s typically a clear expectation of what needs to happen with the material.” Along with her classes, she also credits the experience she gained in internships for helping her earn her position. In her experience, she
found that engineers are often busy and have little time to do aspects of the work that she, through her internships, knew how to do.

When asked to describe the relationship between her job and the engineers with whom she works, Rebekah explained that her job is to make sure that the information the engineers present to their audience is clear and effective. She summarized the importance of her role by saying “the more clear you are in your communication, the happier people are with the result and the more positive they are about the whole experience.” In her particular office, her team works on designing satellite and vehicle concepts. Rebekah’s job is to ensure that the final product is what the customer expects and that it is presented so that the customer can understand the processes and details that went into making the product. She explained that a common problem is that an engineer’s complex technical jargon can create a communication gap between them and their audience. As a technical writer, Rebekah acts as a bridge between the gap to make sure that the customer is “hearing what they need to hear in the way they need to hear it.” Scenarios like these are why it’s important for a technical writer to be able to understand the needs of others. However, Rebekah stated that these needs can vary depending on the office where the writer works. This variety is why technical writing is a unique field.

Rebekah’s particular office allows her to work with cutting-edge designs. This is an opportunity she knows that not all technical writers have. She went further to say that that a technical writer must learn the needs of their particular office because those needs will define their duties and their employer’s expectations. Duties can vary from writer to writer, and even a single technical writer can be assigned a variety of different duties. This variety in tasks is something Rebekah particularly enjoys about her position. She and her team work with different types of products so, even though she is using the same set of skills, she is able to apply her skills
in different ways. This allows her to experiment with new methods and be creative. She described herself as someone who likes to remain busy, so she appreciates having different tasks to work on. However, she doesn’t always have the same amount of work each week. The ebb and flow of her workload is often determined by the team projects. Some projects keep her very busy and require more of her time than usual, while others are rather slow. This ebb and flow is another reason why technical writers need to be highly adaptable and why they, and those who work with them, are always looking for better, easier ways to adapt.

Efficiency is a big topic among technical writers and is one of the main driving forces of change in the field. People are always trying to find ways to be more efficient in their communication, and their methods of efficiency once again vary depending on the company and their needs. Sometimes, technical writers work on projects that are specifically for making their jobs and related jobs easier. This desire for efficiency is one reason why Rebekah can see at-home work becoming more common after the pandemic. She predicted that when on-site offices begin opening again, only a few people will go back, and others will continue their work from home. Since jobs like hers don’t usually require individuals to be in a specific location in order to get work done and because being at home allows individuals to set a more comfortable pace for themselves in an environment where they can more easily de-stress, it makes sense that making at-home work more common would be the next step in the pursuit toward better efficiency in the technical writing field. Rebekah made it clear that she intends to adopt the practice, and she predicts most of her fellow technical writers will as well.