

The Art and Science of Technical Communications



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Understanding the Basics

Technical Communications is the process of conveying usable information through writing, illustration or speech about a specific subject to a specific audience. Technical communicators create products or deliverables for various media including paper, video, and the Internet. Some written examples include user manuals, reference manuals, process and procedure manuals, technical manuals, online help, training materials, business related reports, and more.

In developing these materials, organizations often leverage qualified technical writers and cross-departmental support from illustrators, usability experts, user interface designers, marketing personnel, and training personnel.

Assessing Your Business Need

Experts in almost any field can have difficulty explaining complex concepts to non-experts. It is easy to forget that “common knowledge” within an industry can be quite unfamiliar to an outsider, and audiences do not appreciate being talked down to either. Then what is the answer for companies in fields such as engineering or IT when preparing technical documents?

Most importantly, an organization should be careful to avoid using the “wrong” writer for the job. It is useful to remember that a marketer specializes in promotion; an engineer generally focuses on data and lab reports; a software developer writes the code to make something work. A technical writer, on the other hand, specializes in interpreting engineering data, software data and other concepts into something the average user can understand.

Some of the common problems found in documents written by non-technical writers include:

1. A writing style that's wrong for the audience
2. Erroneous assumptions about previous knowledge
3. Poor document organization
4. Too much detail, too little detail, or the wrong details
5. Use of jargon, technical terms, and other language at the wrong level

What causes the above types of writing problems? Most frequently, these issues stem from: (a) a writer who is not familiar with the language, style, and presentation norms for the audience, (b) a failure to plan or allocate enough time to complete the task, (c) lack of interest or experience, and (d) language difficulties.

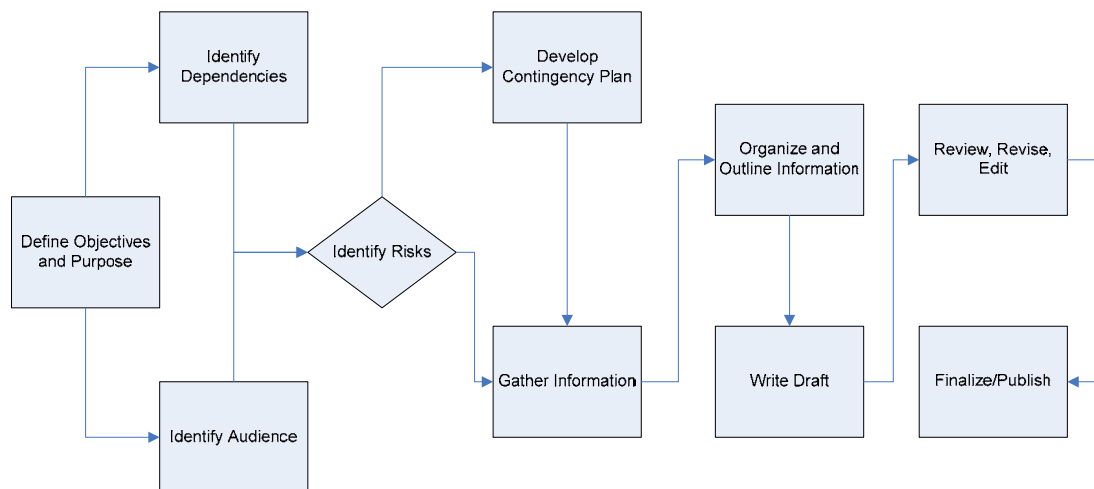
Building the Right Documentation

A skilled technical writer can help meet organizational requirements by determining what documentation is needed, how best to organize and produce the materials, and how much time is required. The individual should understand the target audience and be able to ask the right questions of subject-matter-experts and interpret answers in a way that satisfies the needs of that audience. And, the writer must also be adept at organizing the material and preparing templates for technical experts to complete, as appropriate.

It should also be noted that it is unlikely a single writer will be suitable to write for all audiences. For example, proposal writing is a highly specialized area, and an organization should seek an individual with that specific expertise.

Once a skilled technical writer is identified, that person should build the required documentation using a defined methodology, in which he/she will:

1. Define the program objectives/purpose
2. Identify Audience(s)/ Dependencies
3. Identify Risks
4. Develop a Contingency Plan
5. Gather Document Information
6. Organize and Outline Information
7. Write a Draft
8. Review, Revise and Edit (include peer review, focus group, etc)
9. Finalize Materials
10. Enact Publishing/Updating Process



While it may take many hours to gather and organize the information needed to create the document, a strong technical writer will communicate effectively throughout the development process with a broad range of stakeholders, from the technical expert to executive management, ensuring that corporate needs are satisfied.

Tips for Success

Here are some last minute reminders:

1. Enlist the necessary resources
2. Understand audience needs
3. Get subject matter experts' buy-in for timelines and milestones
4. Keep people accountable to their commitments
5. Resist "feature creep" during document development
6. Over-deliver and be delighted with the results!

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