

Technical writing

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Technical writing is any written form of technical communication used in a variety of technical and occupational fields, such as computer hardware and software, engineering, chemistry, aeronautics, robotics, finance, consumer electronics, and biotechnology.

The Society for Technical Communication defines technical communication as any form of communication that exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: “(1) communicating about technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations; (2) communicating through technology, such as web pages, help files, or social media sites; or (3) providing instructions about how to do something, regardless of the task's technical nature”. Therefore, technical writing is any writing that exhibits any of these characteristics.

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Overview

Technical writing is performed by a technical writer and is the process of writing and sharing information in a professional setting. A technical writer's main task is to convey information to another person or party in the most clear and effective manner possible. The information that technical writers convey is often complex, and it is one of their main tasks to analyze the information and present it in a format that is easy to read and understand. A good technical writer needs strong writing and communication skills and must be proficient with computers, as technical writers do not just convey information through text. They use a wide range of programs like Adobe Photoshop to create and edit images, diagramming programs like Microsoft Visio to create visual aids, and document processors like MadCap Flare to design and format documents.

While commonly associated with online help and user manuals, technical writing covers a wide range of genres and technologies. Press releases, memos, business proposals, product descriptions and specifications, white papers, Résumés, and job applications are but a few examples of documents that are considered forms of technical writing.

Techniques

Good technical writing is concise, focused, easy to understand, and free of errors. Technical writers focus on making their documents as clear as possible, avoiding overly technical phrases and stylistic choices like passive voice and nominalizations. Because technical documents are used in real-world situations, it should always be explicitly clear what the subject matter of a technical document is and what should be done with the presented information. It would be disastrous if, for example, a technical writer's instructions on how to use a high-powered X-ray machine were difficult to decipher.

Technical writing requires a writer to extensively examine his or her audience. A technical writer needs to be aware of his or her audience's existing knowledge about the material he or she is discussing because the knowledge base of the writer's audience will determine the content and focus of a document. For example, an evaluation report discussing a scientific study's findings that is written to a group of highly skilled scientists will be very differently constructed than one intended for the general public. Technical writers do not have to be subject-matter experts (SMEs) themselves and generally collaborate with SMEs to complete tasks that require more knowledge about a subject than they possess.

Document design and layout are also very important components of technical writing. Technical writers spend much time ensuring their documents are laid out in a fashion that makes readability easy, because a poorly designed document hampers a reader's comprehension. Technical document design stresses proper usage of document design choices like bullet points, font-size, and bold text. Images, diagrams, and videos are also commonly employed by technical writers because these media can often convey complex information, like a company's annual earnings or a product's design features, far more efficiently than text.

Technical documents

Technical writing covers many genres and writing styles depending on the information and audience. Below are some examples of the most commonly produced technical documents. As these examples show, technical documents are not solely produced by technical writers. Almost anyone who works in a professional setting produces technical documents of some variety.

1. **Instructions and procedures** are documents that help either developers or end users operate or configure a device or program. Examples of instructional documents include user manuals and troubleshooting guides for computer programs, household products, medical equipment, and automobiles.
2. **Proposals.** Most projects begin with a proposal—a document that describes the purpose of a project, the tasks that will be performed in the project, the methods used to complete the project, and finally the cost of the project. Proposals cover a wide range of subjects. For example, a technical writer may author a proposal that outlines how much it will cost to

install a new computer system, and a teacher may write a proposal that outlines how a new biology class will be structured.

3. **Emails, letters, and memoranda** are some of the most frequently written documents in a business. Letters and emails can be constructed with a variety of goals—some are aimed at simply communicating information while others are designed to persuade the recipient to accomplish a certain task. While letters are usually written to people outside of a company, memoranda (memos) are documents written to other employees within the business.
4. **Press releases.** When a company wants to publicly reveal a new product or service, they will have a technical writer author a press release, a document that describes the product's functions and value to the public.
5. **Specifications** are design outlines that describe the structure, parts, packaging, and delivery of an object or process in enough detail that another party can reconstruct it. For example, a technical writer might diagram and write the specifications for a smartphone or bicycle so that a manufacturer can produce the object.
6. **Descriptions** are shorter explanations of procedures and processes that help readers understand how something works. For example, a technical writer might author a document that shows the effects of greenhouse gases or demonstrates how the braking system on a bike functions.
7. **Résumés and job applications** are another example of technical documents. They are documents that are used in a professional setting to inform readers of the author's credentials.
8. **Technical reports** are written to provide readers with information, instructions, and analysis on tasks. Reports come in many forms. For example, a technical writer might evaluate a building that is for sale and produce a trip report that highlights his or her findings and whether or not he or she believes the building should be purchased. Another writer who works for a non-profit company may publish an evaluation report that shows the findings of the company's research into air pollution.
9. **White papers** are documents that are written for experts in a field and typically describe a solution to a technological or business challenge or problem. Examples of white papers include a piece that details how to make a business stand out in the market or a piece explaining how to prevent cyber-attacks on businesses.
10. **Web sites.** The advent of hypertext has changed the way documents are read, organized, and accessed. Technical writers of today are often responsible for authoring pages on websites like "About Us" pages or product pages and are expected to be proficient in web development tools.