

Technical Writing at Extra Consult: your knowledge and our expertise

Introduction As part of the product development and marketing process, documentation is an often underestimated aspect. It is easily considered an additional cost, or even wasted money. What counts, is that performance in this area is not worse than the competition. We feel that is the wrong approach.

Multilingual documentation is usually part of a manufacturer's legal obligations. However, it is just as much a part of the marketing strategy. Professional documentation will help you to better meet your customers' expectations.

You should have a pretty good idea of what it costs to provide and maintain high-quality, accurate and professional product documentation. But have you considered what it might cost you if you did not?

In this document The purpose of this document is to provide a good insight into the technical writing services we offer and the way we approach a project.

The following topics are addressed:

Topic	Description	See
Technical writing services	The basic principles of our technical writing module explained.	p. 2
Project workflow	A detailed overview of a typical technical writing project by Extra Consult.	p. 5

1. Technical writing services

In general Generally speaking, technical writing comes in many different forms. Whether it is a traditional paper user manual, an online help, a computer based training, a getting started guide, a quick reference card, a product animation, a training syllabus, a technician's maintenance manual, a wall chart with emergency instructions or any other type; they all have one thing in common: they provide information on a specific subject to a specific target audience.

User documentation and consultancy

The documentation we primarily focus on, is the type that targets the end user of a product. To be able to use your product as you intended it, the end user needs clear, concise and accurate instructions to perform certain tasks and operations. The end user is generally not required to understand all the technical details; that is the technician's job.

That does not imply we cannot help you with your technical documentation. We do believe that complex, highly technical documentation is best written by someone who is familiar and comfortable with the subject matter. That could be someone involved in product development or engineering, who has suitable writing skills to do the job, although it is not his or her specialty. If it would take an external technical writer too much time to get a good understanding of your specific technical environment, it may lead to frustrations for both parties.

In these situations, however, our technical writing expertise can still be of service to you. You will be managing the contents of your documentation yourselves, but we are there to provide assistance in document structuring and standardized writing. Your product knowledge interacts with our technical writing expertise; a combination that leads to superior results compared to what an engineer or technical writer could ever produce by themselves.

Why external?

Why rely on an external source for technical writing? Obviously, because it has certain advantages:

- **Vision.** You know your product well, but that does not necessarily apply to your target audience. By electing to have an external technical writer write your documentation, you greatly reduce the risk that too many aspects are taken for granted. Our external vision guarantees that these essential technical aspects are identified and appropriately clarified for users of all levels of technical understanding.
- **Perspective.** Documentation – and communication in general – is intended for a specific target audience. It is important to correctly identify it in advance, and to select the best possible way to present the information. Hence “information design”. It is certainly important that your documentation contains the right information for the user, but we can make sure that the information is intuitively structured and presented, so that users can easily locate the information they need the way they need it and where they expect to find it.

Why external? [continued]

- **Budget.** Perhaps you have the right people and the right tools for the job. Perhaps you do not. There is no doubt that the required investments are considerable. Besides the budget issue – purchasing hard- and software, hiring technical writers – there is one thing you will certainly save on with external technical writing: time. Time your employees can spend on other important tasks while the external expert takes care of your documentation.

Multilingual

Depending on your market situation, language and translation can be of the utmost importance. We can produce your basic documentation in English, Dutch or French.

That is not enough, of course. You will be required to provide a number of additional translations. Our extensive professional experience in the translation business allows us to provide your documentation in virtually any language you may require – naturally, after finalizing the source language.

Illustrations

Do not underestimate the graphic aspect of documentation. A manual is not read the way a novel is. One quick look should be enough to understand a concept or an instruction. Nothing is more suited for this than a graphic element, because it can make you focus on the smallest details without losing the complete picture.

Imagine a software manual without screen shots. And those are quickly and easily made with a handy little tool, but integrating professional technical illustrations in a manual is a different story. We have selected an experienced technical illustrator who can do more than make an accurate, realistic technical drawing – like from a photograph. The illustrations clearly demonstrate how the user must execute a specific step in a procedure. You will agree that this requires very specific skills.

Technical aspects

With all of today's information technology, a technical writer's job is not what it was fifteen or twenty years ago. Writing tools are a welcome addition, but there is a catch. If technical writers want to demonstrate what wonderful things they can do with these tools, they are bound to lose track of the users' needs.

It is not our intention to demonstrate our technical ability. What counts is that the available tools are used to improve your documentation when and where it is necessary or useful, not the fact that we have them and know how to use them. You will benefit from that as our customer, but, more importantly, the end users will receive the documentation they need.

The standard writing tool we use, is Adobe® FrameMaker®, an exceptional, complete package for professional publishing up to (very) large volumes. We did not select it because it is probably the most used worldwide for this type of work, but because it simply offers all the right advanced possibilities for standardized writing with intelligent graphic integration, cross-referencing and indexing.

Naturally, we can write your manuals in standard office applications, but it implies that certain advanced functions will require a lot more manual work, or that they are even impossible. Should you have prior versions of your documentation, published with a different tool – for example Microsoft® Word® – we can convert them to FrameMaker for you. You can buy the program online for around 800 USD, and perhaps take a training course from an Adobe certified trainer. We can help you get started by designing your templates and teaching you the basics.

What we offer

Apart from specific custom projects, we offer these typical technical writing projects, for paper and electronic documentation:

- writing, rewriting and structuring of user-oriented documentation



- consultancy and advice pertaining to technical writing in general
 - graphic illustration work for all your documentation needs
 - animations
 - translation of technical documentation
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2. Project workflow

Workflow Technical writing projects at Extra Consult are completed according to the following workflow:



Each of these steps is described below.

Project analysis Together with the customer, the documentation needs are carefully examined. From the start of the project, the main setup is determined and all objectives are defined clearly for both parties. The major issue in this phase is the identification of the target audience.

Planning After thorough analysis, a realistic project planning is elaborated, pertaining to both budget and timing. Obviously, adjustments can be made as the project advances. If these adjustments have a major impact on the project planning, it will be modified accordingly. Both parties must agree on these modifications.

Briefing When both parties agree on the planning, a detailed briefing is organized. The objective of the briefing is that the technical writer becomes familiar with the operation and usage of the product for which he is going to write the documentation.

Briefing is generally an ongoing process rather than a predetermined phase. Consequently, it is advisable to appoint one or more contact persons within the company for the course of the project, to provide additional information to the technical writer when necessary. This also ensures your close involvement in the entire documentation workflow.

Structuring This is the first writing phase, which focuses on the structuring of the contents. At this point the initial structure can be evaluated to see if it corresponds with the customer's expectations and the project analysis and planning.

A few complete draft sections allow you to verify that the project setup matches with your house style in terms of layout and writing.

Draft Once the overall structure and style are approved, the technical writer works out the entire manual. The customer preferably remains closely involved (see briefing) to ensure that the draft is as close to the final result as possible, so that the planning objectives can be met.

Standardized writing As a rule, our technical writing projects are based on standardized writing in the broadest possible sense:

- It means, in the first place, the use of exact terminology. If two expressions have the same meaning, there is no reason to keep them both. Besides resulting in a clearer language, this also has a positive effect on possible translation costs.
- Standardized writing also refers to uniform language and style throughout the documentation. Special attention is devoted to what is common and acceptable within the specific market and product environment.
- It is also compliance with the rules determined in the customer's house style.

Review The completed draft is transferred to the customer for thorough review. Minor style adjustments may be made at this point, but most of the attention goes to the contents and the technical and conceptual accuracy.

After correction, illustrations are integrated in the text – in case it had not been done yet – and the documentation is submitted for a second review.

Upon completion of the second review stage, the documentation is finalized and delivered in accordance with the initial agreements. The final package may consist of source files, an electronic ready-for-print document or both.
