

Writing a technical manual

Technical manuals are often required by companies who manufacture products so that they can provide their customers with accessible information on the installation, operation, maintenance and use of the manufactured product. These manuals can cover anything from children's toys, electrical gifts, industrial tools, cooking equipment and watches. If manuals are poorly written, or worse, not provided at all, then the number of telephone calls and emails enquiring about how to use a product is likely to be high. In some instances, complaints are likely to be high too! So it pays to provide a well written technical manual for each of your products.

Pulling together a technical manual may sound relatively straight forward, but you have to think about how you would respond to a product if you were seeing it for the very first time; i.e. as a customer often sees it. This can be a tricky task when you spend every day working with or creating the product yourself. A technical manual also needs to be available to all of your customers, and so this can mean that you need to think about how to translate the manual and how to distribute it.

So, before you embark upon drafting your first ever technical manual, here are some points to consider:

1. Know your audience

Think about who is going to read this manual. Are there any assumptions that you can make about the level of knowledge the reader will already have? Are there any abbreviations that will be included in the manual that you should ensure are well defined? Will diagrams help?

2. Think about quantity

Before you can decide upon distribution you need to establish how many copies of the manual you are likely to need. Will the manual be distributed with a product that is very popular for example? If so, you are likely to need a larger number of manuals printed and distributed than you would need if you were simply producing a manual for internal use. If you are simply producing a small quantity of manuals then it may be appropriate to use a basic word processing package and write and print off the manuals yourself. For larger manuals it is likely to be more cost effective to have them printed commercially, using an industrial printing company, where they can no doubt be bound and made really for distribution too. It may of course be a more cost-effective approach to produce an online manual that you can simply direct all customers too.

3. What language?

Are you likely to need to translate the manual into another language(s)? If so, don't forget that words and sentences can be longer in other countries and so you may need more page space – German and Scandinavian languages for example can sometimes need up to 30%

more line space than English. It is advisable to ask any translation companies you intend to use to provide you with a sample translation first, and if you have any guidelines on style or voice, ensure that you have let them know of these preferences prior to the contract with them commencing.

4. Who will create the manual?

Whilst you might think that the designer of the product is the best placed person to write the manual, this may not actually be the case, as they are likely to overlook information that is obvious to them, but to the reader would require some explanation. So try to choose an author for the manual who has an appropriate technical background but who will ask all of the questions that a reader might ask when faced with the product for the first time.