

# Documentation for the Y Generation

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## Abstract

This article demonstrates how technical writing will need to evolve to better suit the Y Generation (the “Millennials”).

A brief definition of the millennial generation will be outlined, followed by a comparison of past, present, and future means of sharing information. The ultimate goal of the article is twofold.

First, to present the emergence of new communication tools and digital media such as QR codes or e-learning publications, and how using the Internet is an effective means of enabling and developing collaborative communication.

Second, to demonstrate how this media could be used to improve technical documentations' user accessibility, mobility and interactivity.

To conclude, we will highlight the pros and cons of these new media resources.

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## Introduction

In France, Generation Y refers to persons born between 1975 and 1994 and is the generation that directly follows Generation X born between 1960 and 1981.

The Generation Y population is also referred to as Millennials or even Digital Natives, as they came into a fully-fledged computerized world.

The beginnings of the Y Generation can be placed in 1975 for two reasons. First

because this was the year when most major technical and technological changes occurred. People started having personal computers and access to communication devices like the Minitel.

Then, because 1975 saw the emergence of the “knowledgeable society”, with more than 40% of young people getting a higher degree diploma.

Today in France, the Y Generation totalizes 16 million individuals. According to the INSEE, this represents 27% of the whole of the population. It is the largest generation

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since the baby boomer generation. As a comparison, there are 70 million Millennials in the United States and more than 200 million in China.

In 2015, it is estimated that the Y Generation will represent 40% of the working population's task force and thus their integration will become the biggest challenge for companies.

This generation grew up in the era of globalization with a high unemployment rate and the fear of a diminished social status.

They also grew up being able to communicate in ways that their predecessors never could have imagined.

Generation Y is a generation of questioning (Y=why). They question everything and especially the society they live in. The Y can also refer to the shape of the headphones that they commonly use.

They hardly read anything paper based but like to play computer games, watch movies on the Internet, and have made search engines their favorite source of information.

Technological advancements in real-time media and communication drive their expectation for immediacy - they want what they need as soon as they discover they need it.

As they prefer to do everything virtually, this generation is changing the very core of education and learning. Real time communication is the basis for this. Whether sending instant messages to ask for help, or learning from each other informally via online collaborative applications and tools, the Y Generation has become accustomed to quickly and easily finding the information they need.

This new method of learning is one where anybody can teach and anybody can learn. Classrooms mean limitations, structure and control, and this is not something that the Y Generation can or wants to relate to. Also roles are reversed, as students now

evaluate their teachers as well as each other.

Companies therefore need to adapt their documentation and to accomplish this, they need to understand how this generation wants to receive information and then package it and deliver it through a number of different channels.

### 1. State of the art

#### 1.1. Past

Technical communication was not recognized as a profession until 1980 even though it had existed for more than 30 years. Joseph Chapline was the first man to be considered a technical writer in 1949 when he published the first user manual about the BINAC computer.

Even before the arrival of the World Wide Web, technical writing benefited from computer technology. The tools were rudimentary but useful for publishing technical documentation. *Microsoft Word* was the main software and documents were sent to clients on floppy disks, CD-ROMs or paper. It was not the quickest way to transfer documents, but it was the only way at the time.

In 1987, publishing software allowed technical writers to develop attractive layouts for their documentation. With software such as *Corel Ventura Publisher*, *Interleaf*, *Adobe FrameMaker* and *Aldus PageMaker*, they were able to add colors and use typography style sheets.

In 1999, the introduction of XML and DITA gave a solution for technical writers to easily structure their documentation.

#### 1.2. Present

The arrival of the Internet changed the way technical writers worked. With the decline of printed documentation, traditional user manuals gave place to digital documents which were easily accessible, transferable and consultable. They do not take up a lot of

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space and it is really quick and easy to update them.

With tools such as *Adobe RoboHelp*, technical writers can publish documents, accessible online or offline and can provide online assistance to customers.

Single sourcing tools are a wonderful invention to gain time. Reusing content changes technical documentation as it provides the possibility to create documentation adapted to different audiences and also of publishing it in different formats. With globalization, there is a need to translate documents, and single sourcing makes this task easy and economical.

Channels such as YouTube offer tutorials in different domains. Users have the possibility to consult these everywhere from a plethora of devices (computers, tablets, smartphones, etc.) and to share them on social media platforms such as Facebook.

As a matter of fact, Facebook is one of the many current social media platforms via which customers can get in touch with a company, ask questions and become aware of updates. Social media resources are the tools for companies to get customer's opinion about their products. They have an aim similar to forums on which customers can also get help for a product.

Another way to get help is instant messaging, which is frequently used by big companies such as SFR. Customers can chat with an employee and ask questions. It is like having a telephone conversation except it is free and online which also offers the possibility of sharing screens to be able to show exactly where the problem is situated.

### 1.3. Future

To evolve, technical writing will need to be innovative and interactive in order to be adjust to the Y Generation. This generation

only works with digital tools and can easily adapt to new tools.

In the future, documentation will probably be exclusively digital. To get help with a product, people could take their smartphones or tablets and scan the product in question to make a tutorial appear. There is also the possibility that a simple push of a button located on the product will provide a hologram of an employee with whom they can talk.

## 2. Evolution of the tools

As stated previously, technical documentation used to be exclusively paper-based, with little to no regard for format. During this period, basic text editors such as *Microsoft Word* were the preferred tools of technical writers because they fulfilled the basic criteria required to deliver the end-product.

More recently however, technical documentation has become more varied in terms of content and formats (PDFs, online help, simulation videos, etc.). Even with documents that are exclusively destined for print, most users still expect and appreciate a large number of pictures, figures, tables, and screenshots. For this, technical writers have to use a variety of tools to create, crop, resize and edit these elements.

Currently, the tools used most predominantly by technical writers are *Adobe Acrobat*, *Camtasia Studio*, *Adobe Captivate*, *Dreamweaver*, *Madcap Flare*, *FrameMaker*, *Photoshop*, *RoboHelp*, *Snagit* and *Visio*<sup>1</sup>. According to a survey conducted by WritersUA in 2011, Flare is the number one rated tool<sup>2</sup> because it is very efficient at exporting content into multiple formats, both printed and digital. This evidence further illustrates the shift in the technical document from printed to digital, with more and more writers preferring a tool that can easily span both formats.

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You might notice however that these top-rated tools do not all belong to a single category. Among them are screenshot editors, PDF converters, and image editing and video recording tools. This means that a technical writer can no longer simply be adept at using one single text editing software, but must now be able to learn and adapt to a variety of tools in order to produce the deliverables that businesses aim to generate.

It is to be expected that software will change and evolve for any profession, given the current state of technology and how quickly it is advancing. However, technical writing is particular because the profession itself is evolving almost as quickly as the tools. The criteria required to be a successful technical writer in the past (perhaps a profound knowledge of Simplified Technical English or an efficient writing style) is now shifting to vastly different criteria such as image editing proficiency or knowledge of formatting languages such as XSLT, XSL-FO, CSS.

### 3. Evolution of the language

#### 3.1. People centric language

A less formal style of writing is becoming increasingly common throughout the software industry.

This style is sometimes referred to as “casual language”. Within SAP France, it is called “people-centric language”. This type of informal language is one that pleases the Y Generation as it is less technical and complicated than the old style used in technical documentation.

It has some specifics to it such as using contractions, addressing the user directly, using the word “please” when asking the user to complete a task, using task-oriented rather than software-oriented language (for example: “Claim travel expenses” not “Create expense report”), and using the terminology people use when speaking that they can understand without having to learn

them or look up their meaning (for example: “right sidebar” not “Infobar”).

#### 3.2. Written vs. spoken language

Spoken language has always existed prior to written language. What are the functions of language?

Language is a system of gestures, signs, sounds and symbols used to communicate and interact with one another. According to a study from *Ethnologue* (16<sup>th</sup> edition), Mandarin, English, Arabic and Spanish are the most widely spoken languages.

What is the difference between written and spoken language?

Oral language is used when speaking, and written language for texts. Oral language needs to be simple and easily understandable because when someone speaks, you cannot push the “rewind” button to re-listen to something that you did not understand. Oral language is more informal and repetitive whereas written language uses larger vocabulary.

Once you understand that oral language is necessary for delivering a message in an effective way, you can fully comprehend that video tutorials are an incredible resource for technical documentation. They allow you to transfer knowledge with increased interaction. This method is more efficient than written documentation because it shows you step by step how to complete a given task. Not only are tutorials used for technical writing, but also for classes or conferences. Here, no need to endlessly read a paragraph that you do not understand. You can simply watch a video showing you everything you need to do. It simplifies the task and does not discourage someone who is afraid to read a thick user manual. The tutorials can be viewed on multiple platforms (smartphones, laptops, tablets, etc.) everywhere and can be shared with everyone.

### 4. Our ideas for new documentation

#### 4.1 QR codes and interactive pictograms

QR codes have been steadily gaining momentum since their first introduction in 1994 due to the ever increasing popularity of smartphones<sup>3</sup>. Recent statistics have shown that on average, 19% of Americans and 15% of Europeans have already scanned a QR code<sup>4</sup>.

We believe that put into the context of documentation, QR codes could provide a unique and eco-friendly solution to traditional paper-based documentation. If companies began to use QR codes on packaging or on the product itself, consumers could save time and trees by scanning the code and consulting the web-help for their product which is automatically updated and always available. This ensures that no user is faced with the unfortunate scenario of searching for information later on, and then realizing that they have previously discarded the information booklet that they now need.

Similarly, if we use our imagination, it might be possible that in the near future, interactive pictograms or even holograms might become a very real possibility. Imagine the practicality of a user being able to push a button on a product and the user manual for that product automatically downloading onto their chosen device. The possibilities will continue to grow as technology evolves.

#### 4.2 E-books

E-books are a good option for publishing technical content as they can be read on tablets or e-readers which are lighter than a book. These electronic devices are equipped with a huge storage capacity. Imagine how much documentation you could take with you using only one device. The formats used for electronic devices are PDF, EPUB, etc., which do not take up much

memory. It is possible to add more than 1, 000 technical documents to a device.

E-books are so functional that everyone can use them and they are accessibility-ready.

#### 4.3 Downloadable and customizable sections

One thing people like is to be able to customize their belongings.

If people use screen-based technical documentation, they should be able to customize it as they wish. For example, users should have the possibility to highlight paragraphs, change the text color, size and font of their document. Allowing people to do so will probably make more people “love” reading documentation. Indeed, a white and black document without pictures and with a monotonous font is boring. You do not want to read it, even if it is on an iPad or an e-reader.

Furthermore, users should be able to reorganize their documentation. If a section is not needed, they could just delete it or put it at the end of the document in a special folder. Another solution would be just to download the chapters and sections needed when buying a new product. For example, if you buy a phone very similar to the one you have, and just need the chapters about the new functionalities, simply select and download those. The supplier could add a QR code to each product that the user just scans to be redirected to a website containing the downloadable sections for their new product or quick video tutorials.

Based on the same logical approach as video tutorials, serious games are another way to teach and learn more efficiently than with a manual. They are interactive and used in many fields such as in health care, engineering or defense.

How does it work? It is a simulation of real-world events or processes designed for solving a problem. It is entertaining, and also a way to train people before going out in the field. Serious games are similar to

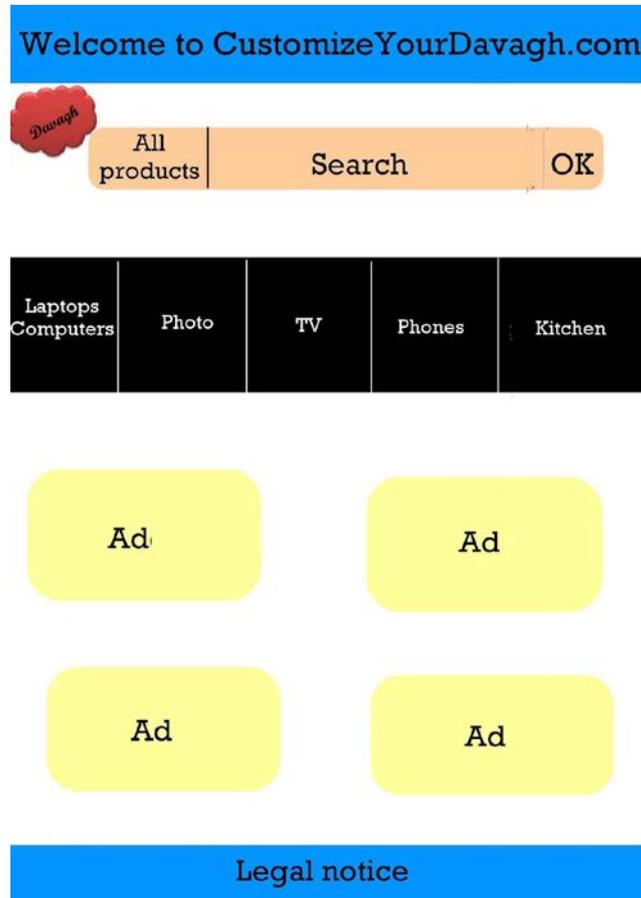
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video games, but they are “serious” and not made with the sole purpose of having fun.

For example, applied to technical documentation, users could train themselves to assemble an object before

doing it for real, ensuring that they do not make mistakes and ruin their purchase.

Future documentation should be accessible online and should contain customizable content, video tutorials and serious games.



*Example of a website on which people could download their documentation*

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*Example of a customized manual*

### Conclusion

As with any emerging concept, documentation destined exclusively for the Y Generation has its pros and cons.

On the one hand, it is highly accessible and quick to consult. The Y Generation has become accustomed to a quick and viable search option (whether a search bar or a quick *Find* command within a browser or software), which in turn, increases the readability of the content and fulfills some of the basic criteria necessary for successful technical documents.

Documentation for the Y Generation is also breathing new life into technical documents because these new formats are exciting and enticing. Due to our consumer culture, people are automatically drawn to things that are new and modern. As a result, documentation for the Y Generation is improving the way the world perceives and uses documentation.

Conversely, sometimes the practicality of this type of documentation can be lacking.

No single format can work for all products, and some products are not as well suited for this type of documentation. For example, software and technological devices are clearly more suited for Y Generation documentation than say, things that must be learned via a hands-on approach, such as scuba diving (though eLearning courses for scuba diving currently exist [[source](#)]). It is also important to remember that paper-based documentation does have an established niche and will probably never be fully replaced.

It is also worth noting that Generation Y is nearly passé, and therefore our job now as technical writers will be to start designing documentation for Generation Z. This could mean going further, or it could mean that a return to older methods will take place, making a full circle.

Clearly, there is no one unique solution, and each business must evaluate the pros and cons of changing their documentation for the Y Generation. However, we feel that this new type of documentation provides a new and exciting opportunity for technical writers and end-users everywhere.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Tom "[What Tools Do Technical Writers Use](#)". *I'd Rather Be Writing*. December 19, 2011. Retrieved June 28, 2014. [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> "2012 WritersUS User Assistance Tools Survey". *WritersUA 2012 User Assistance Tools Survey*. Retrieved June 28, 2014. [link](#)

<sup>3</sup> "QR Code Adoption: 2013 Trends and Statistics". *ScanLife Blog*. Retrieved June 28, 2014. [link](#)

<sup>4</sup> "US Ahead of Western Europe in QR Code Usage". *eMarketer*. Retrieved June 28 2013. [link](#)