

## UFR D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE LANGUES APPLIQUÉES

# Why and how should the interaction between users and technical writers be improved in online documentation?

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Paris Diderot University, 2019/2020

We have been living in a digital era for more than three decades. As a result, digital documentation prevails over paper formats. Technical writers have therefore adapted to the market reality, where people use several types of screen: computers, smartphones, tablets... Each screen has its own specificity, hence the importance to adjust digital documentation to provide better readability and a better understanding. Users need to understand documents instantaneously.

With the impactful rise of all types of social networks, the way we communicate and exchange information has evolved as well. Users want and need to quickly find what they are looking for. They tend to be less patient and focused and would not want to go through the whole documentation. The information within technical documentation must be of easy access, and most importantly, users must have access to it quickly.

Technical writers are therefore facing a challenge: they must adapt to the specificities of the digital world and create methods that allow users to communicate with them and/or to give them a useful feedback.

As of today, technical writing teams use methods inspired by blogs or social networks (FAQs, “like” buttons, comments etc.), in order to receive feedback from the readers. However, this approach is not always effective or relevant.

**Keywords:** technical writer, feedback, documentation user.

# Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to our teacher Ms. Marie Girard and our Director of pedagogy Mrs. Patricia Minacori, for giving us the opportunity to write this research article. We would also like to thank them for giving us a chance to present our research subjects in front of dozens of professionals, during the annual international convention for technical writing.

We would also want to give a very special thank you to everyone who took the time to answer our questionnaire and gave us feedback when some clarifications were needed.

Finally, we are extremely grateful to the English-speaking people who generously accepted to proofread our research article, despite the difficult conditions and the short time period.

# Introduction

The emergence of new technologies is changing the relationship between technical writers and their audience. The audience has evolved from being observers on the internet to becoming more involved and participatory by giving feedback, comments, and evaluations of products and documentation. The audience's behavior also changed: users want and need to find what they are looking for in a short amount of time. Therefore, the documentation must be concise, accessible and efficient.

The most important thing about a successful documentation is that it helps the users achieve their goal (either use a software, construct something or assemble objects). The best way for technical writers to make sure what they write is useful and well organized, is to directly ask their audience.

Nowadays, many tools and technologies are available to communicate with users and analyze their behavior on websites.

Thus, should the technical writers keep a good interaction with their audience? Should they take into account the different types of feedback to improve and adapt their documentation to accommodate the audience's needs?

The goal of this research is to determine why and how should the interaction between users and technical writers be improved in online documentation?.

To answer this question, we will discuss the results and the importance of a detailed analysis of the audience and the impact of new technologies in the interactions between technical writers and users.

As part of our research, we thought relevant to make a questionnaire and send it out to technical writers and any other professionals writing technical publications. The results of this questionnaire will also be analysed throughout this article.

# Methods

To make sure our subject was dealt with in the best way possible, we established a strategy that helped us go from the most general to the most specific. Since we all have to start somewhere, we first tried to think of the best ways we could cover this subject.

## Research

We started off by searching any resources we could find online about our subject. The first thing we did was gather articles from professionals, blogs or papers that related in any way with technical writers and their interactions with their direct users. As we did this, we were able to create our own bibliography, with a short description of each resource and we highlighted the most relevant parts.

This bibliography helped direct us a lot, because we then had an insight on how technical writers managed their interactions with their users and why these interactions were extremely important for the sake of technical writers.

## Questionnaire

As we wanted the points of view of the people involved in the field, we established that creating a questionnaire would be the most appropriate approach. We first tried, as a group, to think of the main interrogations and the main points we wanted to clarify in our article. Once again, the ideas coming from each team member were different, but they completed each other.

We started off from the mindmap and the ideas we were able to gather in it to think of the most relevant questions we could ask technical writers about their relationship and interactions with users. Our team brainstorming resulted in us creating a questionnaire comprised of 21 questions, that we divided in five sections, organized in a logical order. This questionnaire was made and published on Google Forms.

We spread this questionnaire on our LinkedIn pages as we wanted to reach out to professionals. We also were able to share this questionnaire with former students of our master's degree and with colleagues, to make sure the people most in the know could help us get the most accurate responses.

# Results

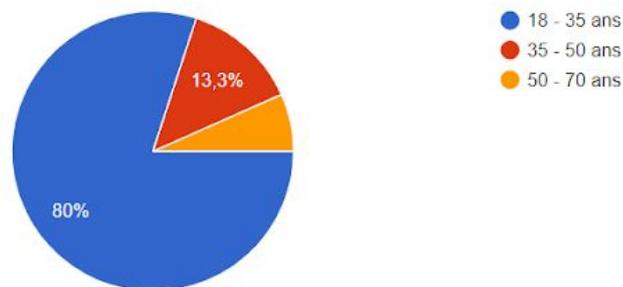
## The population of our questionnaire

The first few questions of our questionnaire were about getting to know our audience. Among 15 answers, 80% of our respondents are between 18 and 25 years old, which makes them a young audience, mostly composed of recently graduated technical writers.

A minority of our respondents are senior technical writers.

Quelle est votre tranche d'âge ?

15 réponses

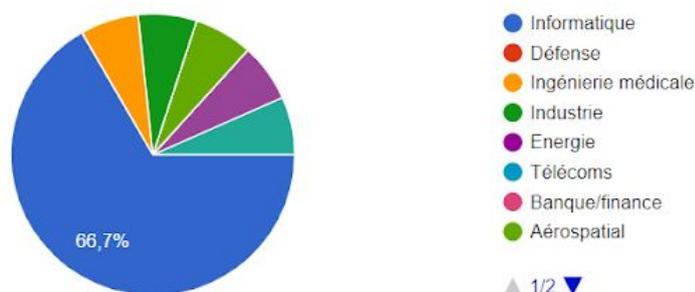


Since our research article is centered on online documentation, we also wanted to ask our respondents what business sector they are writing technical documentation in.

Among 15 answers, two thirds of them work in the IT sector, which represents 10 respondents. The rest of the respondents work in various other fields such as medical engineering, aerospace or aeronautics.

Quel est votre secteur d'activité ?

15 réponses



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Lastly, we were curious about the kind of population they usually write their technical documentation for, so we asked them what kind of audience their documents were targeted towards

Among 15 answers, 60% of the respondent usually write their technical documentation for professionals. 20% of them write for people who are less experimented.

Pour quelle audience rédigez-vous ?

15 réponses



To conclude on the population who kindly answered our questionnaire, most of them are young technical writers working in IT companies and writing technical documentation for professionals, although 15 respondents would not be statistically enough to provide significant results.

Throughout the rest of our research article, we will present the results of some other questions we asked and analyze them.

# Discussion

## The audience analysis

Our research has helped us understand that, as a technical writer, a detailed analysis of an audience is essential. This analysis can be done using different methods:

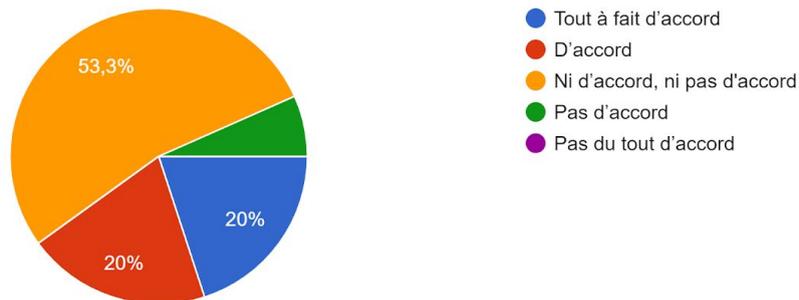
- The creation of a persona
- Retrieving feedback from the audience

### Persona profile: a useful tool

According to our questionnaire, most technical writers remain sceptical of the idea that creating a persona is always relevant, when trying to know an audience better.

Êtes-vous d'accord avec cette affirmation : lors d'une analyse d'audience, établir une fiche persona est toujours pertinent.

15 réponses



Modeled after users, personas imitate behaviors, attitudes or contexts of use in a personalized way. As such, they make for a central tool in the field of user-centered product design.

The persona hereby created is generally endowed with a first name as well as social and psychological characteristics, that make it possible to establish a typical profile of a certain audience.

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It is not always relevant to create a persona. Indeed, it takes time and it is not totally accurate (we cannot gather a complete insight of users reading the documentation). However, it remains a useful tool to better know the audience.

To create a persona, it is important to retrieve several types of information:

- the level of experience of the audience
- the needs
- the objectives

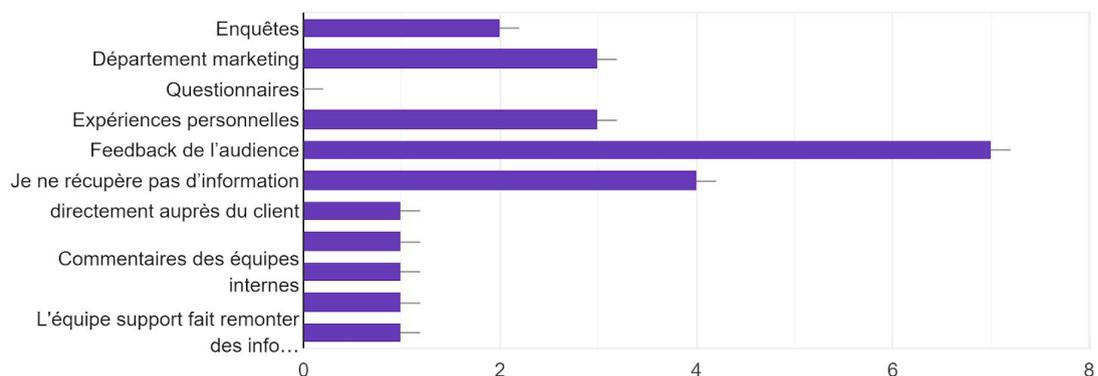
Having an overview of their audience allows the technical writer not only to get to know it better, but also to know what its objectives are and what it is looking for. To retrieve these different types of information, the technical writer uses various means such as questionnaires, popular opinion, personal experience and user feedback.

## User feedback: understanding the audience better

According to our questionnaire, the most relevant way to gather information about one's audience remains user feedback.

Vous récupérez l'information sur l'audience grâce à (cases à cocher) :

15 réponses



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Indeed, interacting with the audience allows the technical writer to get relevant feedback from users who have already used the documentation. This allows the technical writer to better understand their needs, their goals and what could be improved to write a more relevant and accessible documentation.

Receiving user feedback can be done in a variety of ways.

Our research has taught us that the most commonly used methods are:

- The collection of comments or e-mail sent by users

This approach allows a contact with people who can directly express how they feel when using the product documentation, their needs and goals. The writer can thus know what the audience wants.

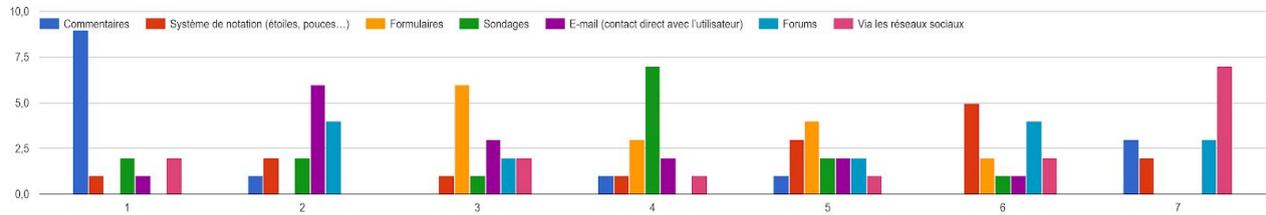
- Forms and surveys

Sharing forms and/or surveys allows the technical writer to obtain answers to specific questions about a document or product. The exchange is not direct but allows the technical writer to get feedback and to adapt documentation according to the majority of answers.

- Social networks

The advent of social networks has led to a change in the behavior of users when searching/collecting information. Today, users have the possibility to contact experts or editors in order to give direct and instant feedback. The audience also tends to look for quick and concise answers that will help them in their tasks. With this easy and almost unlimited access to information, the technical writer needs to adapt. Being able to have a direct exchange with his audience allows him to get a direct and relevant feedback from users, a direct exchange that brings more clarity in terms of user needs.

Quel type de feedback recevez-vous le plus souvent ? Classez les propositions suivantes de la plus reçue à la moins reçue (1 étant la proposition la plus reçue et 7 étant la moins reçue)



By keeping a good interaction with its audience and taking into account the different types of feedback, the technical writer can improve their documentation to accommodate the audience's need for a short, concise and accessible documentation.

However, it is not always easy to know how to ask for and get a qualitative feedback.

### A qualitative feedback for a better user experience

User Experience is at the heart of business concerns. Born in the 1990s, the term "User Experience" encompasses all end-user interactions with the company, its services and products (E. Law, V. Roto, A. Vermeeren, J. Kort, M. Hassenzahl). Producing content in line with user expectations is one way to improve user experience.

Feedback is the key to understand those expectations. It will highlight areas of improvement in order to enhance the initial user experience. Feedback is therefore considered a strategic tool for a continuous improvement of user experience.

The collection of feedback has now become part of users' habits. While we are all familiar with satisfaction questionnaires and surveys, other feedback collection techniques have emerged in recent years to ensure that feedback is collected in a relevant way in terms of context, timing, questions asked, etc.:

- Ratings
- User interviews
- Physical meetings
- Emails

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Designed to be more interactive and engaging, these techniques allow a more subtle integration into the user's experience, while being aware of over-solicitation.

Here, the objective is to make users want to give their opinion in order to collect a greater volume of qualitative feedback.

### **Gathering qualitative feedback**

Before collecting feedback, a technical writer needs to ask and answer the following questions:

- Has a feedback request already been made to the users? In what context?
- If so, what was the feedback? Was it enough? Why was it helpful? What were the improvement strategies put in place as a result of this feedback?
- If not, why has no feedback been collected so far? Are there any obstacles to collecting feedback? What are they? How to get around them?
- What are the questions we are asking ourselves today?
- What is the nature of the feedback we want to collect (quantitative or qualitative)?
- Is it possible to use certain feedback collection tools already in place for users?

Once these questions have been considered, it is time to frame the feedback collection.

Everyone can, at his or her own level, ask someone for feedback. This can be in a professional or personal context, on a task, an activity, or other. If we agree with new user-centric approaches, it should be an integral part of the way we approach a situation.

For technical writers, gathering feedback will allow them to improve their documentation, since they will be able to adapt it to his audience.

### ***Explaining to users the reason for the feedback***

Feedback should be honest and without judgment from the person collecting it.

Above all, it is important to put the audience at ease and make it clear that they can express themselves freely and anonymously. It is also important to recall the context (why the feedback is being collected) without saying too much so as to not influence the user.

### ***The quality of the questions will define the quality of the feedback***

Overly focused questions can introduce bias into the answers. Unclear questions will result in vague and impractical answers.

In order to define the questions to be asked, it is necessary to ask whether the information gathered will allow concrete actions to be taken.

Our questionnaire allowed us to discover that most technical writers interviewed offer forms or surveys to their users and often take their comments (via social sites or networks) into account. Some also offer "multiple-choice questions rather than an open-ended question, to guide the user in answering the question correctly".

It is also relevant to ask more and more precise questions:

- Define the user (age, gender, activity, etc.)
- Ask general and simple questions to understand the context: "What do you think of ...? »
- Ask open-ended but directed questions to understand the need: "What are the most valued elements? "What are the least appreciated elements? »,
- Ask for ratings, always with a follow-up question to justify: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with this page? "Why?"
- Open the possibilities field: "Do you have anything to add? ", "Do you have any suggestions for improvement? »

After creating questions, it is important to anticipate the analysis and integration of feedback. For example, it is possible to sort the different types of feedback into categories:

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- What is appreciated (strengths)
- What is less appreciated (areas of improvement)
- User queries
- Other ideas for improvement

Once the feedback has been analyzed, the technical writer in charge of collecting it can take it into account when designing the documentation.

### **Collecting feedback: the right time?**

Today, in the digital age, users are increasingly bombarded with requests for feedback and it is important that their feedback is as numerous as it is qualitative.

To do so, different methods can be used depending on the products or documentation offered to users.

#### ***Collecting feedback immediately after an activity***

The person in charge of collecting feedback can ask what was appreciated, less appreciated or deserves to be improved, during or immediately after the action, task or activity carried out. This allows for unbiased feedback to be collected through subsequent exchanges between users.

#### ***Collecting feedback several days after an activity***

Here, the person in charge of collecting feedback can ask for feedback a few days, weeks or even months after the completion of an activity, action or task. This feedback from users can be important. The learnings from this type of feedback are generally different and complement the previous gathering method.

#### ***Observing the audience***

It consists of actively observing people, interactions that come into play in situations where products, projects or activities are used.

The richness of this method lies in the exploratory aspect which allows to discover, without initial hypotheses and from a grid of criteria, the behavior of users in real situations.

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### ***Using the power of new technologies and social networks***

More and more today, users like to share their opinions directly on social networks. It is therefore relevant to take the time to consider their feedback.

With the emergence of new technologies and social networks, it is nowadays possible to communicate instantly with one or several users that can directly tell the technical writer what can be done to improve the documentation.

### **New technologies and challenges**

During the last two decades, the development and the expansion of new technologies have undeniably impacted our lives. They have changed our ways to live, work and communicate.

New technologies have one aim: improving quality of life and making it easier. We have access to unlimited data and resources, as well as powerful tools and machines to help us in various areas.

Whether it is at work or in our daily lives, new technologies have become a norm applicable all over the world, from the high technology industries to the home of a family, new technologies can be found in everything and everywhere, under different forms and with different purposes.

New technologies have proven their efficiency in major sectors such as communication, security, education, business, etc.

New technologies helped us manage work and social relationships during the major sanitary crisis of COVID-19, making it extremely easy to work from home for many people, through emails, online meetings and VPNs to recreate the same access to servers you have from the office.

As the years went by and new technologies provided new products and services, they easily imposed themselves as the norm in our daily lives and became irrevocably essential.

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# It is all about User Experience

From now on, technical writers must take into account the user experience for three reasons.

First, in a world where users are less focused, and everything around them can become a distraction, technical writers want to make sure users find what they are looking for easily and quickly.

Additionally, the documentation produced by technical writers is a part of the product the companies sell. Hence, if users have a hard time understanding what technical writers have produced, and therefore how to use the product, there is a chance they would rather buy the competition's product instead of theirs. Nowadays, documentation is a part of the communication process with companies' clients. When a company provides users with unclear and unstructured documents, it damages the trust that its users put in them.

Furthermore, companies need to keep in mind that users are more disposed to write negative comments when they are unhappy. So, it is in the companies' interest to involve technical writers in the user experience process because those negative comments could harm their online reputation and make them lose potential clients.

## A user-friendly documentation

To summarize, unstructured information architecture and irrelevant information result in unhappy users. So how can technical writers produce user-friendly documentation?

### Content first and design second

With new technologies, companies migrate their information from printed format to digital format. Henceforth, companies think about how to stand out from their competition and apply their style guide to a digital format while successfully providing information to their clients.

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To do so, it is essential to think about the content and then the design.

When technical writers know what information they want to share and how it can be found easily, it is easier to produce a design with a more significant impact on users. Indeed, they think about which information they want to highlight. In this way, content and design guarantee better communication between users and technology.

### **The use of a clear language**

Technical writers should produce documentation that everyone can read. Hence, they should avoid writing scientific abstracts nor using buzzwords. Instead, their documentation should be simple, informal, direct and unambiguous. They should only write what is necessary and on the interest of users.

Ferry Vermeulen, MSc., a specialist in technical documentation, has developed The Thumbs Up Technique to help technical writers improve their content in three steps:

1. Remove everything that is not relevant for users to complete the task.
2. Use the online Simplified Technical English (STE) dictionary. By properly using words in this dictionary, technical writers avoid the use of ambiguous words.
3. Use the STE dictionary to craft understandable and straightforward sentences.

The Thumbs Up Technique could also reduce the companies' costs by saving time on translation and maintenance.

### **The power of images**

Depending on the document technical writers produce, they can include several types of images (graphics, illustrations, gif, pictures) or even videos.

Users are less focused when they read on a screen, and images can summarize information that could take many pages. They will also entertain users and help them digest the information that technical writers teach them.

Moreover, images are universal. So whatever the language the users speak, they will understand them (and the company will also save translation costs).

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However, technical writers still need to be careful with images that are not explained or followed by text. They could sometimes end up being more confusing than helpful for users.

### **The structure of the document**

Whether the document is printed or digital, technical writers should structure it as users want an answer to their question as quickly as possible. To do so, technical writers should group their content under logical sections. They should then break those sections into subsections. However, they should link the sections' and subsections' content when the topic is similar.

The most important factor is to keep in mind what users need and cut off the information users do not need to know.

### **Usability tests**

According to John Lannon, a professor specialised in professional writing, once technical writers produce their documentation, they need to test it before delivering it to users.

When testing their documentation, they need to determine if users :

- Quickly locate the info they need
- Understand the information immediately
- Use the information successfully.

It could be either an alpha or beta test.

If the technical writer chooses to conduct **an alpha test**, their team will go through the documentation trying to locate, understand and use the information.

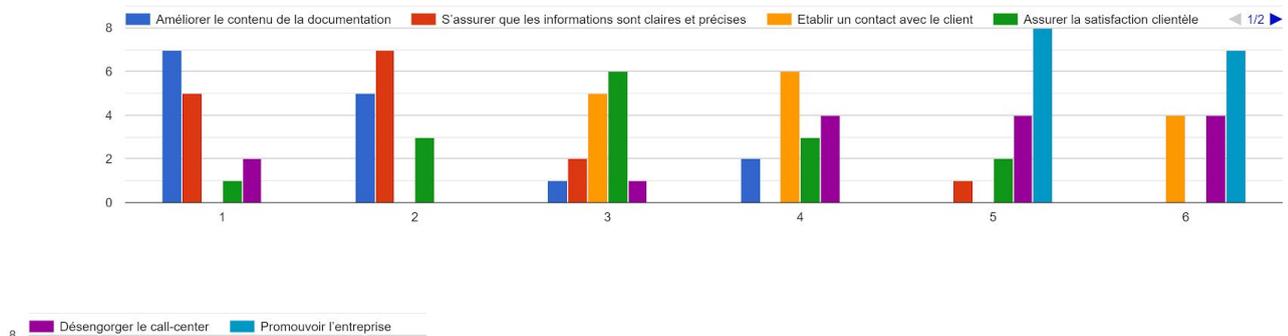
However, if they choose to conduct **a beta test**, actual users will go through their documentation, and complete tasks the technical writer's team will assign them. The full or partial completion of these tasks will determine how usable their documentation is .

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# Social media and technical writers

New technologies do not only mean technical writers need to adapt their content to the digital format. It also transforms how users communicate with each other. Users daily use social media to get news, to talk to their relatives, and eventually, to look for information about products' companies. They can find information about the products' popularity and decide whether they want to buy them. However, they can also ask questions about the products they already own. technical writers can provide users with all of this information in their documentation and use the direct feedback to improve their content.

Quels sont les bénéfices du feedback ? Classez les propositions suivantes de la plus bénéfique à la moins bénéfique (1 étant la plus bénéfique et 6 la moins bénéfique)



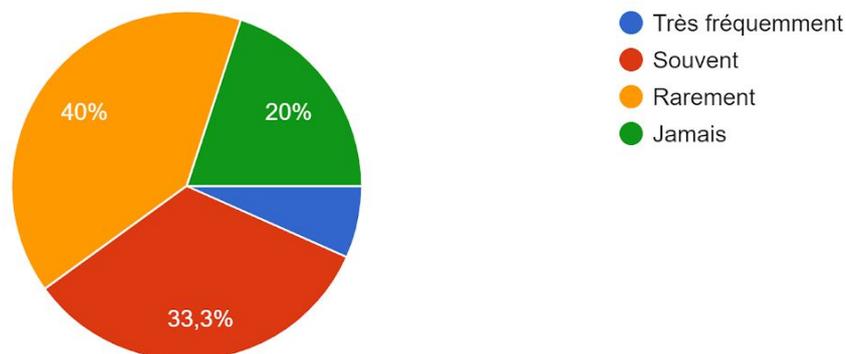
## Direct feedback and social media

According to the technical writers who answered the survey, the benefits of direct feedback are :

1. To improve their documentation
2. To guarantee the precision and the clarity of their content
3. To ensure client satisfaction
4. To establish contact with clients

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À quelle fréquence recevez vous du feedback en interaction directe avec l'utilisateur.  
15 réponses



One can assume technical writers consider the user experience as the essential reason to obtain feedback from users. However, at the same time, they rarely get direct feedback from their users. Indeed, they get feedback from different speakers(product experts, support team, sales team or developers) and their companies have not always developed systems that allowed technical writers to get direct feedback from users.

However, a system that aims to stimulate interaction between users or between a company and its users already exists:social media.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, social media is a form of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).

Social media seem to be a place where technical writers could meet a community of people who like, use or are interested in their products. Users would probably talk about the products' technical document and try to find more information about them.

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## **Which social media to use?**

Nevertheless, not every social media is useful to deal with the direct feedback problematic that technical writers are facing. They need to be careful when they choose which social media they want to use. They want to make sure they can share a significant amount of text and share links to redirect users to specific content. Each social media outlet has its own goals and target a specific type of users. From one social media to the other people are not looking for the same content. That is why technical writers also want to ensure the social media they choose is designed for users interested in accurate information about a product or an area.

According to these previous criteria, there are two types of social media technical writers can use to get feedback :

- Social media that allow companies to share information directly to their users, like Companies' blogs, Facebook and LinkedIn. The information that they share can be about new features or products and updates.
- Social media that allow users or experts (of a product or/and an industry) to share tips and give their opinion about products, but also, ask and answer questions. Social media with this purpose are Youtube, blogs and forums.

## **How can social media improve content**

### **Communicating with users**

According to the survey, a majority of technical writers want to receive feedback. However, they hardly ever get it directly from users. As technical writers told us through the survey, one of the benefits of direct feedback is that someone else would not filter it. Therefore, if technical writers receive feedback on social media, they are sure to collect it directly from users.

Moreover, technical writers' presence helps to build trust between the company and its users. Indeed, providing accurate and easily accessible information to users who have purchased their products or want to buy them has two benefits. It proves that their products are well-documented (and hence easy to use), but also that their companies have quality customers service.

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## **Content for users**

The feedback technical writers have collected on social media needs to be analysed. The content shared by users shows technical writers what users want, and it can be useful in many ways.

Technical writers can analyse which information users search the most.

If they have already documented that information, it may mean users do not know where to find the information. Thus, technical writers could rethink how to deliver their content and make it more accessible to users.

They could also know which features are the most used and so which ones they need to document more to fit the users' needs.

However, the content can also be about features technical writers have not documented yet. Thus, they can use what users share to enrich their documentation. It can be about features technical writers have not yet documented or tips to develop a feature they have already written about.

Lastly, one should not forget that a lot of the feedback technical writers collect on social media is related to the products' functions. Hence, technical writers need to share any feedback that allows them to improve the product they document with the product's teams.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research article was to determine why and how the interaction between technical writers and the users is important to make relevant and useful technical documentation.

Thanks to some personal research we did on the subject beforehand and the answers to our questionnaire, we have come to the following conclusion.

In technical writing, a persona profile can be used as a strategic tool to establish a precise and accurate profile of the users reading the documentation, in order to adapt it and make it as relevant as possible, and even transform the quality of the documentation into an actual sales pitch. Once the documentation is finished and handed to users, it is important to ask for feedback. There are various ways, tools and software to get some feedback, such as surveys, emails, comments or social networks. Before asking for feedback, the technical writer must have a clear idea of the type of feedback they want to get from users, in order to ask the right questions.

Receiving feedback is an important step, but taking this feedback into consideration and including it in the documentation is an even more important step. As technical writers, the usability of our documentation must always be our priority.

Timing should be taken into account as well. Asking for feedback directly or just a few days after publishing a documentation seems to be the best way.

Once the technical writer gets feedback from users and fully understands the challenges related to new technologies, the benefits of these feedbacks are multiplied and can benefit various departments within the company: a reliable documentation reflects a reliable company. Indeed, digital formats for technical documentation require a different organization of information, they would favor the use of videos and tutorials for example.

These new technologies also imply new ways to communicate and exchange. As of today, social networks have taken a sizable role in our lives, even inside companies. Technical writers should not overlook them and think social networks are just for free time, they can be a powerful tool to receive feedback from users when they are properly configured.

The technical writing sector is in transition, just like many other sectors. users need to always get more and more information about the products they want to buy and how to fully and effectively use all the functionalities these products have to

offer. It is in the best interest of companies to give as much importance to readable and accessible documentation as they do their marketing strategy.

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# About the authors

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Roxanne is a technical writer at General Electric Healthcare. After completing a Bachelor degree in Languages (English and Japanese), she studied technical writing for three years. She wishes to better understand users' needs and objectives to create a more structured, relevant and accessible documentation.

## **Deborah Chaplice**

Deborah is a Junior technical writer at Axa - Direct Assurance. Interested in different areas, she graduated with two Bachelor degrees, one in Applied Foreign Languages (English and Spanish) and another one in Tourism. She wants to understand user needs and digitalisation challenges better. She also aspires to become an expert in UX writing in a couple of years.

## **Bouchra Drif**

Bouchra is a Junior technical writer who graduated with a Bachelor degree in Applied Foreign Languages (English and Spanish). She studied HTML 5 and CSS 3 afterwards, which opened her to the IT sector and lead her to the technical writer sector. She is curious about new technologies and is always eager to learn something new. Her internship at Sinequa was a great opportunity to get a solid experience as a Junior technical writer in a software company.