

# 4 The Tech Writer's Toolbox

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Now that you have a doc plan and an outline, there is one last thing you need to consider before you dive into writing content: do you have all the tools you need to complete the job?

This chapter explains the software you need in your Tech Writer's Toolbox.

**NOTE:** Some of the programs listed in this chapter are open source programs you can download for free. See page 242 for information on open source technology.



## Content/text development tools for printed content

The most important tool in your toolbox is the one you use to write the text. There are many word processing, document processing, and desktop publishing packages that support template-based authoring, and each one has its advantages and disadvantages.

**NOTE:** You may not use a document processing tool if your department creates only online content. Instead,

you may use just a help or web authoring tool; see page 67 for more information.

If you're working in a corporate environment, you probably won't get to choose the tool for developing content. You'll use whatever your manager hands you—and like it (maybe).

Many technical writers use a basic word processing program such as Microsoft Word. Although Word is adequate for short business documents, it is not designed for long, complex documents, and it often becomes unstable when you try to maintain very lengthy documents.

For writing documents that will be printed, you need a tool that can:

- Handle many embedded graphics
- Number steps and figure captions automatically
- Create complex tables
- Maintain cross-references
- Generate indexes and tables of contents

This list also applies to content in Portable Document Format (PDF).<sup>1</sup> A PDF file maintains the formatting of a printed document, but it gives you the benefits of online content, such as hypertext cross-references.

A good choice for printed and PDF documents is FrameMaker software. FrameMaker is specifically for creating and maintaining long technical documents.

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1. More information on the PDF format:  
[www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/](http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/)

Taking advantage of FrameMaker's powerful document processing features can greatly improve your productivity by reducing the amount of time you spend on tedious document maintenance.

If you plan to create different kinds of output from your document (for example, online help and HTML), keep in mind that you'll need to find an output path from your source document format to the other formats. See "File conversion and single-sourcing utilities" on page 67 for details.

If you're producing graphics-intensive shorter pieces (such as a newsletter), you might consider one of the desktop publishing packages, such as QuarkXPress or InDesign. These packages are less oriented toward book production but are better than FrameMaker at producing full-color, highly designed documents. If your content needs to look like a very expensive annual report, these tools may be right for you.

#### **Contemplate that template**

Templates aren't just for document processing. They are also common with other applications technical writers use: graphics programs, help authoring tools, and file conversion utilities. Regardless of what kind of program it's for, a template generally has the same purpose—to ensure consistency in presentation, which is an essential component of good technical communication.

If you are working in a structured authoring environment, you may use a tool for authoring in Extensible Markup Language (XML) instead of using a document processing or desktop publishing application. XML is a specification for storing structured content as text. See Chapter 13, "Structured authoring with XML," for more

information. XML development tools include XMetaL, Arbortext Editor, In.Vision, and Oxygen.

## **Graphics software and clip art packages**

To create the screen shots, illustrations, and other graphical elements in your content, you need several kinds of graphics software:

- Screen capturing—to take snapshots of items on your computer screen. If you're writing about software, you'll need pictures of the software, and screen capture software does that quite well. See "Displaying information from your computer screen" on page 136 for information about taking screen shots.
- Drawing—to draw shapes (particularly for flowcharts and technical illustrations).
- Graphics processing/editing—to change a file's format, to touch up and crop graphics, and so on.

Some software packages (such as Paint Shop Pro) can handle both screen shots and graphics processing. However, most drawing tools don't provide graphics processing and vice versa.

HiJaak, Paint Shop Pro, and SnagIt are popular for taking screen shots on Windows machines. For the Mac, Snapz Pro is available. For UNIX, try xv.

**NOTE:** Most operating systems have built-in (but basic) tools for screen shots.

If you need to create flowcharts, consider Visio or OpenOffice.org Draw. For drawing line art (for example, a detailed view of hardware), you need a package such as Illustrator. For graphics processing or editing, use a tool such as Photoshop or Paint Shop Pro. (“Using graphics in content” on page 129 has more information about using still images in content.)

A clip art package can be helpful when you need icons in your text (such as a stop sign to flag warnings). If you don't have much drawing ability or access to a graphic designer's services, well-chosen clip art can prevent quite a few headaches. Keep in mind that you want a high-quality selection of clip art and that some clip art packages have restrictions on the number of times you can use an image and where (for example, some permit you to use the images on the web only). In addition to buying packages of clip art, you can purchase individual files from web sites such as [www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com).

## Rich media tools

Now that more and more content is being delivered online, you can go beyond standard images by including videos and animations (often referred to as *rich media*). Tools such as Captivate and Camtasia record what happens on screen, and you can use the software to add narration to what is shown in a clip.

Flash enables the creation of animations and interactive content, including tutorials, presentations, and games. (The player for showing Flash files is free.) If you see an

online ad that includes action and sound, there is a very good chance the content was created with Flash.

“Using rich media content” on page 141 has more information about rich media.

## **Help or web authoring tools**

If you're developing online help or web-based materials, you'll need a tool to write the help or HTML. For online help, you can use tools such as RoboHelp and Flare, and to write HTML, you can use tools such as Dreamweaver.

If you're going to create documents for more than one type of output (for example, print and HTML), your best bet is to use a text development tool that has conversion capabilities (or that's compatible with a third-party conversion tool, as explained in the next section).

## **File conversion and single-sourcing utilities**

There are many third-party tools that convert word-processing files to other formats, including online help, HTML, HTML Help, JavaHelp, and XML. Converting the material intended for print means that you don't have to spend time re-creating a different type of output in another authoring tool. Conversion tools include ePublisher and MIF2GO. RoboHelp and Flare also have conversion capabilities.

To convert documents to PDF format, you'll need Acrobat or another tool that converts files to PDF format. The Acrobat Reader, which lets users view PDF files, is available for free.

The ability to create multiple types of output from one set of files is called single sourcing, as mentioned in "Are templates and structure really that important?" on page 44. Most documentation departments have instituted some form of single sourcing. Some companies convert their word processing files with third-party tools to PDF format and online help. Other companies have more complex single-sourcing environments in which authors write small chunks of information that are later combined and transformed into print/PDF and online help deliverables. (You'll read more about such an environment in "Structured authoring with DITA" on page 234.)

**This software is hard to use! Help!**

Some of the tools listed in this chapter—particularly for text development, graphics, and file conversion—are not applications you can learn quickly (or even easily). Getting formal training is the best option, but it can be expensive. Many software manufacturers' web sites list companies that train people how to use their software. Your local chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) may list (and even sponsor) training in your area. Also, check with your local community college about software-related continuing education classes. If you're lucky, your employer may reimburse you for the cost of training.

If training is not a possibility for you, consider getting a third-party reference or a workbook, and visit web-based discussion forums, particularly those at a tool's corporate site. Low-cost or free online tutorials, such as the free FrameMaker workbooks at [wiki.scriptorium.com](http://wiki.scriptorium.com), are also available.

## Other helpful software

There are some other software packages you'll need as a technical writer. Some of these applications are open source tools you can download for free. (For information about open source tools, see "Free but not cheap" on page 242.)

These tools, which aren't limited to the technical writing profession, include the following:

- **Compression utility**—Files can become quite large, particularly if they include graphics, so it's a good idea to have a tool such as 7-Zip (PC) or Stuffit (Mac) that compresses files before you send them to a coworker or the client. Compression is essential when sending large files via email.
- **Communication software**—You'll need a tool for email (such as Outlook or Thunderbird) and file transfer protocol (FTP). Sometimes, files are too big to send through email as attachments. FTP software lets you transfer the files over the Internet without using email. (Web browsers have some FTP capabilities, but the dedicated FTP clients are more fully featured.) A good rule of thumb is not to send an email attachment larger than two megabytes (MB). Don't forget to use your compression utility for larger files sent by FTP, too.

On the PC, you can use commands at an MS-DOS prompt to send files via FTP, but most people prefer using software with a user interface, such as FileZilla.

You can also use online file transfer services such as [www.yousendit.com](http://www.yousendit.com).

- Project management/time-tracking tool—Having software that tracks your schedule can be helpful, particularly when several people are working on a project. Microsoft Project is a widely used project-tracking tool, and there are also web-based programs such as Basecamp ([www.basecamp.com](http://www.basecamp.com)) and LiquidPlanner ([www.liquidplanner.com](http://www.liquidplanner.com)).

You can also use a web-based calendar that all team members access. That way, everyone can see when deliverables are due. You can create such a calendar for free at web sites such as Yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) and Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)). Even if you are the only person on a project, laying out your schedule can be very useful.

- Encryption software—If you're sending confidential information over the Internet, consider using encryption software such as Pretty Good Privacy ([www.pgp.com](http://www.pgp.com)) or GNU Privacy Guard ([www.gnupg.org](http://www.gnupg.org)) for your email. Keep in mind that both the sender and the recipient will need the software.

**NOTE:** In your company, you may be required to use specific tools for email, project management, and so on. Your company may also have specific configurations for the tools.

## Computers and ergonomics

Most newer computers have more than enough processing capability and memory to run the programs you'll use. If you're using an older computer, though, it's a

good idea to check the system requirements of applications to ensure your computer meets the specifications.

You're going to spend a lot of time looking at text on your monitor, so get the biggest one you can afford (or talk your boss into buying a big one). At an absolute minimum, your monitor should be 17 inches. This will help minimize scrolling through your pages. Also consider using two smaller monitors instead of one large monitor; many systems today can support dual monitors.

Because technical writers do spend so much time in front of the computer, it's important to have an ergonomic work space to prevent repetitive motion injuries (including carpal tunnel syndrome) and other problems (such as eyestrain).

Some things to consider about your work environment and how you work in it include the following:

- Height and position of your chair and keyboard
- Posture
- Lighting

For resources about ergonomics, see "Ergonomics" on page 301.

