

FAQ About Outsourcing Writing Projects

By Tanja Rosteck

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If you're never outsourced a writing project before - or never had to - you probably have a lot of questions about the process.

Many businesses outsource product documentation, web content, and marketing materials because they don't have someone in-house who has the necessary skills and/or time to do the project. And it's often too expensive to hire a full-time employee for a one-time job, especially for a project that requires specialized skills.

If you've wondered whether outsourcing your writing needs is the right option for your business, read on!

* When it can be cheaper to outsource

Generally speaking, if you have long-term requirements or a lot of writing that needs to be done, it's probably best to hire a full-time employee. However, if your projects are a one-time deal and not much maintenance is expected down the road, it's usually more cost-effective to outsource.

With every employee you hire, you're responsible for additional operating costs such as payroll taxes, workers' compensation, benefits, insurance, training, and so on (not to mention the extra administration time). You have to provide a computer, phone line, office space, furniture, software licenses, and coffee. And if you hired the employee from a staffing or contracting agency, you're also paying the agency a high mark-up (usually 75% or more) on that person's hourly services.

When you outsource, you're simply buying business services from another company, thereby dodging those employee expenses and administration hassles. The more subtle saving, though, is in

productivity - you're not paying a provider \$X per hour to walk around the office with a coffee cup, chat with co-workers, and surf the Internet during work hours. If you deal with a reputable, ethical provider, you'll only pay for the time actually spent working on your project.

* When it can be more expensive to outsource

Here's the flipside of the first point: A service provider builds their own operating costs and (naturally) profit into their fees. If your project is long-term or requires a lot of on-site visits, you may be better off hiring someone full-time and footing the operating costs yourself. Unless you're IBM or Microsoft, paying someone else's marked-up taxes, insurance benefits, and travel costs for a year or more just isn't cost-effective in most cases.

And for some products, having an internal resource for documentation just makes more sense. If your product is complex or requires a specialized environment, an off-site arrangement might be difficult to work with. A documentation project's success lies in the writer's ability to play around with the product to its fullest, so unless you're working with someone who already has an extensive test lab, consider keeping these kinds of projects in-house.

* A good solution: partial outsourcing

Partial outsourcing is cost-effective but still gives you the benefit of a professional's expertise and skills. For example, you can write the basic content of the documentation in-house, then outsource it for editing, formatting, layout, and publication.

This ensures the content will be accurate from a technical standpoint (since you, the expert, wrote it!), but will also ensure it's structured and presented in an expert way. Research and writing often form the bulk of documentation projects, so you'll also save a lot of money, even though it may take longer to write it yourself.

Even if you want to "do it all" yourself, an outside opinion can still be very valuable. Technical people tend to write in a very technical style, and often forget the average reader isn't at a skill level close to theirs. But a documentation specialist is trained to write for non-technical audiences and translate difficult concepts in simple terms. Hiring a provider to at least do a review of your work can produce great results at little cost.

* I'm sold! So how do I find a provider?

The best time to find a service provider is BEFORE you actually need them. Too often, documentation specialists are brought in at the very last minute, when everyone's rushing to get the product finished by

the release deadline. The client doesn't have time to do thorough draft reviews, the writer can't get a clear enough picture of the requirements and goals - and the result is an ineffective document.

Before starting your search, sketch a brief outline of your requirements. Knowing your basic needs and goals in advance saves a lot of time and aggravation, and can help you target your search more effectively.

Referrals are the best (and easiest) way to start your search. Ask your colleagues, clients, and business associates if they can recommend a particular provider. If you've been impressed by a particular product's documentation, call the company and find out who developed it for them.

If you can't find a suitable provider through referrals, try the Web. Take a minute to consider the web surfing you've already done. Have you already come across any documentation specialists during your travels, such as on business forums, technology-news sites, or from that interesting article you read last week? (Hint, hint!) Chances are, you have.

* Choosing which provider to go with

Once you have a small pool of referrals and possible candidates - anywhere from three to twenty - start checking each of them out in detail. Visit their websites to get a feel for their style, skill level, and what they offer. Do you get the impression they can handle all aspects of your project in a professional way? Or do they just look like a "moonlighter" who might not be able to take your deadlines seriously?

Contact each of your candidates to introduce yourself and discuss your needs. A reputable service provider should NOT charge you just to talk about your requirements! This consultation should only cover the information in your outline. Keep in mind that without very specific details about your project, such as approximate number of pages needed for a user's manual, it's almost impossible for a provider to nail down a realistic time or cost estimate.

If you sense they understand your goals and can deliver what you need, put them on your "short list" and say you'll follow up once your requirements are more defined. Good service providers will stay in touch with you anyway to ensure you don't forget them when the time comes!

* So what's next?

That depends on the provider you choose, as they all have different ways of consulting with clients, developing a project scope, and presenting a proposal. Always remember that the service provider is

there to help YOU - not the other way around! Be prepared to look elsewhere if they can't meet your needs or aren't fully committed to your goals.

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