

**LASSELLERAMSAY**  
Business Content Development

White Paper

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## 10 ways to Reduce Documentation Costs

Joan Lasselle  
Summer 2008

## Overview: 10 Tips for Reducing Documentation Costs

Documentation development can cost a lot. But good documentation is not just a cost burden to the enterprise; good documentation sways customers, earns loyalty and increases product sales and adoption rates. This white paper lists 10 ways to reduce documentation development costs while providing content that is more accessible to your users and easier to update and maintain for the enterprise.

**Who benefits from reading this paper?** If you are a publications manager, CIO, marketing director, or if you have a content development task as a key part of your job, you can benefit from this sound advice and set of practices.

## Key Concepts and Keywords

Documentation development costs, best practices, 80/20 rule, minimizing rewrites, structured content, downloadable documents, metrics and scheduling, SME reviews, electronic distribution, audience analysis, personas.



# 10 ways to Reduce Documentation Costs

## Documentation Cost Control

This paper outlines 10 simple, effective steps you can follow to reduce publications and documentation development costs while improving the design and effectiveness of that content for your user. A not unintentional by-product of these steps is the clarification of the content development mission. Putting these steps into place is not hard; you are probably already doing at least 3 of the items on this list. Doing them all will result in well-oiled documentation development machine, producing timely, accurate content, on time, with little duplication of effort, in a predictable, cost-controlled and cost-measurable way.

Bill Gates in *Business at the Speed of Thought*:

“The best way to put distance between you and the crowd is to do an outstanding job with the information. How you gather, manage, and use information will determine whether you win or lose.”

(Gates, 1999)

## Who Benefits

This list is not just for publications managers. It is also for writers, editors, marketing communications producers, web developers, CIOs or anyone in the enterprise who has content development responsibility. Ultimately it is for the users, who will get sharp, well thought-out documentation that makes products and services easy to use.

### 1. Gain cooperation from engineering.

Cooperation between writers and engineers can make or break a project. When subject-matter experts (SMEs) are unavailable, the writing process is delayed. When SMEs do not return reviews or they return reviews with vague comments, a face-to-face meeting with each SME is necessary. Ensure that SMEs know the following:

- When to expect the review and schedule time accordingly
- What sections they are being asked to review
- How and when you want the reviews returned

One process we have found that improves the review return rate is to create a PDF or HTML version of the document and then send an email to the SME with links to the sections you want them to review. This works effectively for command references that tend to be several hundred pages in length, since even the most dedicated SME might be overwhelmed by a 500-page document they find on their chair!



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## 2. Use metrics to determine schedules.

Many groups base their schedules on calendar time only and then do what they can in the time available. **Accurate writing and production hour estimates can help you staff your project to meet even the most aggressive schedules.** It can also help you set realistic schedules with engineering and marketing. At Lasselle-Ramsay we use 3 hours per page for new documents and an average of 1.5 hours per page for updating documentation. You can develop metrics for review times, illustration development, production and editing, which builds in some predictability and cost control to the documentation project.

DIVISION/B.U.	DynaMod Flow Rev. 1		
PROJECT	DynaMod Flow Meter SDK		
PROJECT MANAGER	Sally P.		
DATE	Q2		
	Total	Book 1	Book 2
<b>RESEARCH AND WRITING</b>			
No. new pages	175	50	125
Hours/page (usually 3)	3	3	3
Hours	525.00	150.00	375.00
No. revised pages	92.00	72	20
Hours/page (1.5-3)	1.50	1.50	1.50
Hours	138.00	108.00	30.00
Total hours	663.00	258.00	405.00
Rounded	663.00	258	405
# to use for proposal	660	250	400
Hourly bill rate	85.00	85.00	85.00
Total estimated revenue	55250	\$21,250	\$34,000

## 3. Reduce the number of documents.

The more documents you have, the more they start to overlap. They also typically duplicate overview information that is needed by all audiences. Consider structuring documents to serve multiple audiences. For example, if a product runs on Windows and Macintosh, two separate manuals may not be needed if the feature set is the same.

Alternate text in Word field codes and conditional coding tools in FrameMaker make it easier to build several documents from a single baseline set.

## 4. Use electronic distribution.

One of the items with the biggest impacts on your documentation budget is printing costs. Evaluate the possibility of shipping only the installation or getting started guide then delivering the support documentation as PDFs on a CD or by download request from your web site.

## 5. Implement a best-practice methodology.

A best-practice methodology **sets the expectations between the technical publications group and the other members of the release team.** If you don't have a methodology, you might be adding to your development costs with insufficient planning or excessive reviews.



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Lasselle-Ramsay follows a four-phase methodology, called the four D's: Define, Design, Develop, and Deliver.



- Define includes estimating the resources, setting the schedule, and performing an audience assessment.
- Design includes creating a detailed documentation plan, templates, and editorial style guides, and then defining naming conventions.
- Develop typically includes two or three reviews, copyediting, proofreading, indexing, and final layout.
- Deliver includes creating the final media (print, PDF, online) and getting the information to the client.

## 6. Use a single-source solution.

Single-source documentation means that you **write it once and use it multiple times**. An example of this is to write a user guide in structured FrameMaker, which allows standard PDF and print output and also direct conversion, through an XSLT and EDD, to customized html online help. A one-time investment in learning to develop content using structured FrameMaker element definitions eliminates the need for multiple writers to create the same information for print, online help, and HTML.

## 7. Invest in an audience assessment and persona analysis.

Your customers, whether internal or external, determine the level of documentation that is needed for your product or service. An assessment can help you **identify the tasks they will be performing and the knowledge they require to be successful**. Find out how and where they are using information—in the field, at their desk, or only during installation. Developing a set of personas, which are detailed portraits of work habits, goals, frustrations, and needs of the archetypal consumers of your content, can help even further define and refine how you develop and deliver the right kinds of content.

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## 8. Use the 80/20 rule for writing.

**Focus your documentation efforts on the 20 percent of the product that 80 percent of your customers will actually use.** By fully documenting those features, you will substantially reduce the number of calls to Customer Service. For example, 100 percent of your users will have to install the product in order to use it. Never skimp on an installation guide, but write only what your customers need to know. Functional specifications and engineering requirements documents are often loaded with all the functionality and capabilities of a feature that is being implemented. The end user usually does not need to know all the details.

## 9. Justify documentation requests.

Implement a process for approving additional documentation that includes justifying the expense. If the request is coming from an internal group such as marketing, sales, or field service, ask them how the customers will use it. Show the internal group the costs of creating and maintaining the document for the product life cycle. Hopefully, you have your own numbers (from #2 above). **A ballpark number is \$300 per page to create the document and \$100 per page, per year, to maintain it. For a 200-page document, that would amount to \$80,000 the first year and \$20,000 each of the following years. [UPDATE #s]** A less expensive solution might be to post FAQs or white papers on your company's Web site.

## 10. Minimize rewrites.

As software release cycles become shorter, writers often begin writing documentation before the code is frozen. This approach requires making assumptions that the product will work as described in the functional specification, and rewrites are the inevitable result. Find out which features are stable or frozen, and write those first; an installation guide can't be written until engineering knows how the product will be installed. Get agreement with engineering on code freeze dates before capturing screen shots. **When last-minute changes are made to the GUI, the impact on the quality, budget, and schedule for retaking screen shots is staggering.**



# 10 ways to Reduce Documentation Costs

Cut this table and pin it to your wall. Next time someone requests a new document, scan it!

**Table 1. 10 Ways Summary**

Way	Why
1. Gain cooperation from engineering	Ensure that SMEs know the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When to expect the review and schedule time accordingly</li> <li>• What sections they are being asked to review</li> <li>• How and when you want the reviews returned</li> </ul>
2. Use Metrics to determine schedules	Figure out hour-per-page metrics for writing, review times, illustration development, production and editing to build in predictability and cost control.
3. Reduce the number of documents	Consider structuring documents to serve multiple audiences; use structured development tools to repurpose text.
4. Use electronic distribution	PDFs, CDs and download-by-request from the web site—avoid printing, storing, and shipping manuals.
5. Implement a best-practice methodology	A methodology sets forth the technical publications charter and work styles so other members of the release team know what your requirements are.
6. Use single-source techniques	Write it once and use it multiple times—make a technology investment.
7. Do audience analysis and personas	Analysis defines the optimal ways to develop and deliver the right kinds of content.
8. Use the 80/20 rule	Focus your documentation efforts on the 20 percent of the product that 80 percent of your customers will actually use.
9. Justify documentation requests	Implement a process for approving additional documentation that includes justifying the expense
10. Minimize rewrites	Find out which features are stable or frozen, and write those first; avoid iterating on a moving target.

For more on information development best practices, visit [LR.com](http://LR.com) or [get in touch!](#)



## WORKS CITED

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## ABOUT LR

Lasselle-Ramsay is a leading professional services organization that works with you to develop and deliver critical business information and learning solutions for new products, business initiatives, and regulatory requirements. Lasselle-Ramsay integrates content, content development processes, and technology to provide solutions that are up-to-date, on-demand, and personalized to increase productivity and drive know-how. We focus on four practice areas: consulting, technical documentation, training development, and on-the-job information tools.

Since 1982, Lasselle-Ramsay has provided information and learning solutions to leading companies in a variety of industries, such as Fireman's Fund, Genentech, Cisco Systems, and Hewlett-Packard. This experience has resulted in a set of methodologies and best practices that ensure predictable, high-quality results.

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Lasselle-Ramsay, Inc  
The Landmark Bldg P,  
2075 Landings Drive,  
Mountain View, CA 94043

Tel: 650.968.1220

FAX: 650.968.0949

[www.lr.com](http://www.lr.com)

