

New Product, New Owner: Establishing Ownership of a Product's Documentation

Joshua C. Ehlers

Owning product documentation can be difficult, especially if it's your first time in that position. I'm here to help guide you through the process using five steps: identification, exploration, organization, creation, and continuation. This is my self-developed method for dealing with, and overcoming, the challenges inherent with documentation of an entire product. I'm aiming this at first-time owners and brand-new products, but even experienced writers can gain new perspectives and strategies by reading this paper.

Before You Can Write . . .

Owning the entire set of documentation is not reserved for tech writers with years of experience, senior titles, or a few direct reports. The fact of the matter is, you can own a product's docs at any point in your career. My goal with this paper is to explain how you can make sure you're prepared, regardless of your tenure in the field.

First, let me congratulate you for getting a product to call your own. The circumstances may be familiar (you got a promotion and a product because of it) or a rarity (someone managed to pull off a fantastic prank), but every writer in your position should handle it in a similar fashion.

So what exactly does it mean to "own" a product's documentation set?

- You're either the sole writer or the lead writer. Your time isn't spread across other products unless your team needs an extra pair of hands. Most writers, before they get to this point, will work on product features and launches, but they won't be responsible for anything other than content.
- You decide the content strategy for your product's documentation. This may not be a solo task if your company has dedicated strategists, but you'll almost always have final approval on whatever strategy they devise. For a brief primer on content strategy, check out Chad Williams' "Content strategy for technical writers" (Williams, 2020).

- You're the subject matter expert for the product when it comes to representation within your team and company. This isn't an expectation anyone should have of you immediately. Eventually, however, you'll become the most well-versed writer for that product.

. . . You Need to Know Where You Stand

I want to be clear, this paper presents an idealized version of the entire process and experience of product documentation. If your situation is different, I can only hope you can benefit from the parts you can closely relate to. I can't realistically call out every caveat without messing with the readability of this document.

Technical writers, especially those serving as leads for products, should always have a support crew consisting of some, or all, of the following:

- Product and project managers
- Tech leads
- Engineering leads
- Writing manager
- At least one other writer
- Style guides

Product and Project Managers

As part of your support team, you'll lean on product managers and project managers (PMs) to provide

you with launch timelines, initial project scoping, and many other operational requirements. Agile workflows are usually the main

method the PM and their team will use to plan features. As a writer, it may be hard for you to follow that same workflow. One of the first things you should talk to your PMs about is your expectations for feature work.

When considering time and guidelines for your work, the following concerns are a good place to start.

- When you want to start being included in discussions.
- How much time you need for features of various sizes.
- Your review process and how long reviews are expected to take.
- If your content requires localization, the turnaround time for each request.

Tech and Engineering Leads

These are your primary subject matter experts for the product and its features. If you don't know who they are, your PMs need to introduce you as soon as possible.

Leads can help find answers to all of your questions about the technical side of whatever it is you're documenting. This includes things like:

- Providing wireframes or mockups of your product's UX.
- Setting up test accounts you can use to verify your written procedures.
- Putting you in touch with feature engineers that can provide deeper answers to questions.
- Delivering test builds to verify your instructions (Johnson, 2015).

If you don't have access to these resources (more common than you think), your PMs *should* serve as the SMEs, though they may not be able to provide the exact same services.

I strongly suggest getting to know several of the engineers on your product team, even if you don't need anything from them immediately. The more people you know, the faster you get answers.

Other Writers and Your Manager

Like leads, these are your SMEs that will help you figure out how to write for your product. They can

provide you with your company's style guides. They can help you edit your documentation. They can even give you encouragement if imposter syndrome starts to weigh on you.

Sometimes another writer may have worked on the same product you currently own. If they're willing, you can ask them questions about certain features, ask them for advice, and even ask them for important contacts. That last item is usually handled by PMs or leads, but it never hurts to get more people involved. If they're willing to help, that is. Don't be too pushy.

Style Guides

Not a person, but a wonderful resource. If you've been at your company for any significant amount of time, you should already have a good idea of what style guides are available. For some companies these are custom-made to fit the needs of the entire company, divisions, and writing teams.

For others, those custom-made guides are almost always available as an external resource. I highly recommend visiting the Style guides page provided by Write the Docs (Style guides, n.d.). The guides they list are considered gold standards in the industry.

Five Steps Towards Success

The best way I've found to deliver my advice on product doc ownership is splitting it into five distinct phases.

These are:

- Exploration
- Identification
- Organization
- Creation
- Continuation

Step One: Identification

What may seem obvious is still a step that many may miss without realizing it. Unless your product is brand new and you're there on the floor day one, documentation already exists in some way, shape, or form.

Engineers take notes on the features they develop. Leads maintain minutes from meetings. PMs

manage the project's time using tracking sheets or programs. This is all a treasure trove to help figure out the current state of things regarding information about your product.

Now, you may have to dig fairly deep for some of this information. Don't let this step consume all of your time. Even if you can't find any usable information, you can still finish this step by identifying your SMEs and establishing good relationships with them. This will make it easier to build up a library of product info when you're ready to write.

Step Two: Exploration

As you enter this phase, you should have a good idea of the content that exists, and that doesn't exist, for your product. Existing content (notes, minutes, etc.) can be mostly set aside until step three. This part is all about figuring out how to get information for what's missing.

Inevitably, there are going to be undocumented features and functions with your product. While your primary focus should always be on current and future launches, you'll need to eventually build out your documentation with information on these previously launched features. This is one of the best times to reach out to your support team for assistance.

Some of the resources they can provide are:

- Tracking bugs for previous launches
- Change lists for each feature
- Source files

I also recommend taking note of opportunities for articles beyond procedures during this step. Find customer feedback and figure out their common problems and issues with the product. You can use this information to build articles that are most likely to show immediate results. Other good non-procedural articles to think about are tutorials, reference materials, conceptual pieces, and introductions.

A great way to find out what types of articles you may want to include in your documentation is to look at your company's other doc sets. While other writers may not have had the same requirements or may have written their material before the current set of standards, you can still use what's come before to get ideas. If you have access to the

analytics for your site (page views, referral sources, etc.) you can look at some of that data to further narrow down to what articles are worth prioritizing first.

Now, it's possible that this step will take longer than you expect. Returning to this point after completing one pass through the process isn't uncommon as more information comes to light. Identifying what you need to really fill out your documentation is a long and nearly never-ending step. It's also usually the most impactful step.

Step Three: Organization

You have the content plans ready to go; now you need to figure out where it's going to live and how it's going to look. Most of the time the "where" is out of your hands unless you're really in on the ground floor of communications at your company.

During this step your docs should be "conceptual," even if there are completed articles your users can access. Assume everything can and will change in some way by the time you're done.

I recommend starting with your table of contents, building it out in a way that highlights user journeys. Try to focus on tasks that certain groups or customer personas will need to use. Once again, it's smart to lean on your writing colleagues and the products with existing documentation for ideas. This is also a perfect time to think about how your content will interact with those other products using crosslinks or other strategies for sourcing content. As far as steps go, this might be the second-most straightforward.

Step Four: Creation

Now this, this is the most straightforward. You are a writer after all, so it's time to write. Look at your notes, your plans, your strategies, and start implementing them. All of the preplanning pays off here as you can constantly refer to everything you've done so far to stay focused and keep up with any deadlines you've set.

I find it best to start with new content before thinking about revising any existing work. You may need to incorporate some of that missing content in older articles, so you don't want to waste time by returning to them after a first pass. But, as with all things, do whatever works best for you and your

methods and whatever makes life easier for you and your stakeholders.

During this phase you'll want to track your progress somehow, preferably in a way easily accessible by PMs, your manager, and other writers. You can cut down on progress syncs by letting them see, for themselves, how far along you are.

This is probably going to take a long time, depending on how big your product is. Be patient, and don't get down on yourself if the timeline slips. Make sure your stakeholders know that things may come up that stall the development of docs.

As you finish each piece of content, put it online for all the world (or at least your customers) to see. There's no reason to wait for everything to be done before uploading articles. One, you're creating content in an order that makes sense with regards to priority. Two, new launches are one of those things that may stall content, and you don't want to leave those offline. Instead, you will push them live following the structure you developed earlier.

Step Five: Continuation

Technically, by the time you've reached this step, you're done establishing ownership of your product's doc set. That doesn't mean your work is done, though. Remember, products are living things. Launches, updates, hotfixes—all of these will keep going and you'll need to capture any docs related to each one.

Take the lessons learned during the previous phases and build solid processes for handling documentation updates in the future. When you started out, you had to figure out who to talk to. Now it's time for others to do the same. Develop a request process that includes:

- Who should contact you when they need an update
- How they should a formal request (tracking bugs, emails, post-it notes, etc.)
- The timeframe for when they should contact you

These may seem similar to the discussions you had with PMs at the beginning. That's because you're reinforcing those decisions and establishing them for *everyone* that you'll work with.

Keep in mind that these processes are not just there to help you, but are also set up to help other writers who may join your team. They'll also prove helpful for your replacement, should the time come to move on to another product, feature, or team. After all, writers very rarely stay on one product their entire career. In fact, I advise against trying to do so since building out these strategies and establishing ownership is one of the most fulfilling parts of this career.

What's Next?

Other than keeping your content up to date, what else is there to do after you're done and established?

Well, you may want to think about how to make sure the content *is* up to date, no matter how much time has passed. Defining the process for content review is an advanced, but helpful, strategy. Ideally you would review your entire doc set over the course of a year. How to split that up is completely up to your schedule and the size of your docs. During each review period, check for copy issues, content issues, out-of-date information, broken links, accessibility issues, etc. When it comes time for the next big revision, keeping your articles clean and compliant will help ease the pain.

I also recommend documenting all of your strategies somewhere. If your company doesn't have an internal knowledge base, take notes in a text file and back it up to the cloud (or multiple clouds). When it's time for someone else to move into the lead writer position, use these notes to build out a transition plan. If a product has documentation when a lead writer takes over, they shouldn't have to start at square one as you did.

If you really want to make a difference, you can pitch your strategies and process to the rest of your team or company. There are always products in need of docs, after all. It's time to stand behind the finish line and cheer on the rest of the runners.

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Contact Information

Joshua C. Ehlers (they/them)

Technical Writer

Google

625 Boren Avenue N

Seattle, WA 98109

(949) 546-5686

Author Biography

Joshua Ehlers (pronouns: they/them) is a technical writer for Google. They currently live in Seattle in a charming little apartment with their partner of eight years, Samantha.

They've been in the technical writing field for almost eleven years, getting their start in 2011 at Rockwell Automation in Phoenix, Arizona. After leaving the desert behind in 2014, they worked for Blizzard Entertainment in Irvine, California, for six years (they even have the five-year anniversary sword to prove it).

Joshua joined Google in 2020 as part of the Google Cloud team and has worked from home their entire tenure so far. Josh has presented talks at BlizzCon 2018 and at Google's internal writer's conference (Burning Pen) in 2021.