Evolution of Technical Writing at Microsoft

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Mapping to Waterfall software development

- Multi-year release cycles
- Fully comprehensive specs
- Fully comprehensive testing
- Formal feature development review meetings
- Longer documentation planning cycles
- Formal documentation schedules
- Fully-comprehensive doc sets before RTM
- *Windows platform only*
Old school: formal and comprehensive content

• Official editor roles
• Developmental edit pass
• Line edit pass
• Copy edit pass
• Compliancy edit pass
• Fit & finish pass
• Cost-focused localization requirements influencing content experience
Evolving discipline names, job titles and functions

- **Was:** User Education (UE)
- **Then:** User Assistance (UA)
- **Now:** Content Publishing (CPub)
- ...

- Technical Writer
- Content Publisher
- Content Developer
- Instructional Designer
- Technical Editor
- Managing Editor
- Site Manager
- Production Engineer
- Information Architect
- ...

Evolving content success metrics

• Then:
  • Reducing support costs through great Self Help content
  • Deployment/Setup
  • Customization
  • Customer satisfaction (*delight*)

• Now (*above, plus*):
  • Adoption
  • Retention
  • Reach
  • Discoverability
  • Engagement
  • Productivity (e.g., *task completion time*)
Microsoft’s Sea Change

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

--William Shakespeare, The Tempest. Act I, Scene 2
Enter Satya Nadella

“Productivity and platform company for the mobile-first and cloud-first world.”

“We need to modernize our engineering processes to be customer-obsessed, data-driven, speed-oriented and quality-focused.”

“Our industry does not respect tradition -- it only respects innovation.”

Key themes
- Mobile-first, cloud first world
- Be customer-obsessed
- Be data-driven
- Embrace a growth mindset
- Innovate; Fail fast
Agile software development & combined engineering

• In Office, we used to ship roughly every 3 years, on one platform.
• Now, our product teams ship weekly, monthly, or as the spirit moves them. Releases are “quality driven,” not “date driven.”
  • There’s no predictable release cycle across teams.
  • Features ship to multiple platforms.
• Content teams need to partner even more tightly with product group to track what’s shipping.
  • Formal feature specifications are largely a thing of the past.
  • We no longer have dedicated test teams.
• Content teams are more leanly resourced than in days of yore.
• Content teams are planning & tracking their own work in sprints: working agile, while living downstream from agile.
What does this feel like for content teams?

#alwaysbeshipping
Cross-platform world
Modern voice and peer reviews

"You're trying to take something that can be described in many, many sentences and pages of prose, but you can convert it into a couple of lines of poetry and you still get the essence."

--Satya Nadella, Microsoft CEO

Microsoft's brand voice: above all, simple and human

Our voice is:

• Warm and relaxed—We’re natural. Less formal, more grounded in real, everyday conversations. Occasionally, we’re fun. (We know when to celebrate.)

• Crisp and clear—We’re to the point. We write for scanning first, reading second. We make it simple above all.

• Ready to lend a hand—We show customers we’re on their side. We anticipate their real needs and offer great information at just the right time.

Style tips

A few key elements of writing Microsoft’s voice:

• Get to the point fast. Start with the key takeaway. Put the most important thing in the most noticeable spot. Make choices and next steps obvious. Give people just enough information to make decisions confidently. Don’t get in the way.

• Talk like a person. Choose optimistic, conversational language. Use short everyday words, contractions, and sentence-style capitalization. Shun jargon and acronyms. And never miss an opportunity to find a better word.

• Simpler is better. Everyone likes clarity and getting to the point. Break it up. Step it out. Layer. Short sentences and fragments are easier to scan and read. Prune every excess word.
Lean content development

In Office:

• Ship what you think the customer minimally needs. Use data signals to augment or update.
• Be selective and deliberate about the content type that will best meet customer needs.

Don’t serve finger food on a full, formal plate.

Don’t ship a bomb if a firecracker will do the job.
More visually engaging content
Straddling On Premises and SaaS

Challenges in Office:

• Supporting periodic “major” product releases while continuously supporting weekly/monthly service updates.

• Maintaining a portfolio that encompasses both evergreen service content and multi-version legacy content, some of which is single-sourced across both categories.

• Just-in-time content delivery for on-premises server products (support planning deployment tasks @ RTM; backfill operations content in subsequent months).
Ongoing Evolution
In-product contextual guided Help solutions
User assistance chatbots
Open source documentation

• Emerging trend
• Different approaches and platforms in different groups

It’s about enabling people outside the content publishing team (product group, support, etc.) or even outside the company, to contribute to documentation.
Community engagement

Ask a Question

Subject *

How do I create a pivot table?

We may have content matching your question
Check out these results before posting

☆ How can I build a pivot table from two different tables in Excel for Mac?
   Hello! I am trying to do exactly this: http://www.laptopmag.com/articles/excel-2013-pivot-table-from-multiples I need to create a pivot table from two data sources, but in Excel for Mac there’s no...

☆ Pivot table destroying user defined order
   Dear all, I am trying to create a pivot table. The table containing the data to make the pivot table is ordered in a certain way. I would like to have the column ordered the same way in the pivot...

☆ How to populate the same filter in 10 Pivot tables
   Hello group. I have created 10 pivot tables with associated graphs in the one workbook. Each table has the same 2 filters. Filter 2 will not change. I need to change filter 1 and would like it to...
Ongoing (and never-ending) evolution

• Writers do more than write (yes, this has always been true). There’s an increased need for individuals who can:
  • Work with multiple sources of data (content BI, product telemetry, industry info) to develop content strategy & make content decisions.
  • Engage in A/B testing, experimentation, iteration to achieve desired content/business impact.
  • Embed with product groups/track scrum meetings to track feature change.
  • Identify efforts to achieve true business impact through content (e.g., drive product adoption or feature usage in measurable ways).
  • Write clear, engaging content without formal editing support.
  • Pivot across technologies.

• Emerging need for people in “curation role” → “Content PMs”

• Data analysts playing even stronger role within content publishing orgs.
Q&A