

DOCUMENTATION COOKBOOK

RECIPES TO HELP YOU SERVE UP GREAT USER
DOCUMENTATION FOR YOUR STARTUP

Let me level up your user content
while you build the next big thing.

Visit CONTENTBYCORY.COM

WHY YOU NEED THIS COOKBOOK

A great product without great documentation is like a restaurant without a menu, a server, or a host. You serve the best food in town, but when a hungry customer walks through the door, they don't know how to order dinner.

Great
products
deserve
great
documentation

This guide provides recipes for three staples of documentation, so your hungry customers can quickly get what they crave:

- **Content audits** help you figure out what your kitchen is already making and what your customers love.
- **Feature announcements** tell customers about delicious new menu items. Even better: if you post your specials outside (where they are visible to passersby), they entice new customers to try you out.
- **How-To articles** are the front-of-house staff: they guide your customers, help them enjoy your product, and make sure the vegans don't order steak tartare.

CONTENT INVENTORY & AUDIT

You probably already have tons of content!

Your restaurant has no menu, but you don't make one up from scratch. Your chef has a folder of recipes. The restaurant manager keeps a list of the specials. Someone wrote all the vegan options on a note that's stuck to the walk-in freezer.

Look closely: there's more documentation than you knew existed. Ryan in Support has a troubleshooting guide for users struggling with updates. Trey in Marketing has a slide comparing your product to a competitor's. Jesse in Sales has an onboarding guide to help new hires understand the product.

Don't start documenting from nothing. Start by collecting the scattered bits that exist already. Start with a content inventory.

What's an audit?

In the content inventory, you collect the bits of content. In the content audit, all those scraps get organized, reviewed, and aligned with a content strategy.

Where do I start?

As you review the content, focus on:

- What content is most valuable
- Where are the gaps
- What content is duplicated
- Who is creating content today

Who should be involved?

An audit is most effective if you engage all parts of your organization. Choose team members who are already taking an active role in documentation. They've already demonstrated commitment to the cause.

WORKSHEET: CONTENT AUDIT

Answer these questions for each piece of content.

Title

How are you referring to the content?

URL / Location

Where is the content located?
Is there an editable version
and a published version?

Purpose

What questions does the content answer?

Audience

Who is the current audience for this content? Is it valuable to other audiences?

Maintainer

Who is maintaining this content today?

Review

Is the content up-to-date?
Does it contain graphics?
Does the content represent your product well, or does it need improvement?
How much is this being used?
Have you received any feedback on this content?

NEW FEATURE ANNOUNCEMENTS

New Features, Release Notes, What's New: no matter what you call it, telling users about changes is critical.

Talk to the right people

This content type has multiple audiences. The primary audience is your users. However, you may find that Customer Support, Sales, and Marketing teams rely heavily on this content.

Highlight the benefits

Just like marketing materials, a feature announcement needs to focus on benefits, not features. Before talking about how the feature functions, tell your users how it makes their lives better. make sure this description is understandable to your audience: "reduces latency" probably isn't.

Summarize how it functions

For a complex feature, you won't give the full step-by-step here. Instead, you need an overview of how the feature functions.

Invest in graphics

A screenshot or GIF can solidify the user's understanding. Feature announcements are a great place for lots of graphics because they show a specific point-in-time. Announcements won't need updates when the UI changes in a later release. That's not true for other content types!

Be honest about disruptions

Strong customer relationships require trust. If this feature is going to disrupt their current way of doing things, be clear. Then, provide the information that they'll need to move forward.

WORKSHEET: NEW FEATURE

Feature Name

Choose a name that reflects the functionality and doesn't confuse users.

Audience

Remember your primary audience as you answer these questions

Key Benefits

How will this new functionality benefit the users?

How Does It Work

At a high level, how will this work and how will users utilize it?

Potential Disruptions

How will this change the users' current experience? Will there be downtime? Will users need to make configuration changes?

Graphics

Would a screenshot, GIF, or short video tutorial help users to understand this feature?
Does your team have the bandwidth to create this resource?

HOW-TO ARTICLES

When you think about documentation, this might be the first type of content you consider. These are likely to be some of your most-used content.

Start with the audience

Don't describe steak tartare to vegans. "Who is the audience?" is the first question for every piece of content. The level of detail, terminology, and explanation of benefits all depend on your audience.

Portion the content

You may need to cover a lot of information in one article. Don't dump it all on a single plate and overwhelm the user. Separate the information so that a user can easily dig into the part they need.

Be careful with graphics

Like strong cocktails, graphics are great... but dangerous in this context. You can go wild with graphics in announcements, but your team will need to maintain How-To articles as the product changes. Graphics take more time to update than text, so you think hard about whether each one is worth the headache later.

Tell the user why

This is related to the benefits from a feature announcement, but more specific. What is the context in which the user takes this action?

Keep it clear and concise

How-To articles need to get to the point quickly. Your users have other things to do. After drafting content, conduct a ruthless edit.

WORKSHEET: HOW-TO ARTICLE

Title

Choose a title that describes the action.

Why This Action?

Before telling the user how, make sure they understand why they're taking this action.

How-To

What are the steps that the user performs? Use numbered steps and simple language that matches the UI.

Detail Sections

Do any steps require more than a short explanation? Each of those steps should get its own detail section.

Access & Permissions

Which permissions or access settings are required? Is this action limited to specific user types?

Warnings & Limits

Are there any limitations for this action? Will the action affect another component in a way that requires a warning?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

NAMING FEATURES

[Even Naming This Talk Was Hard - Ruthie BenDor](#)

[The Perils of Naming - Linette Voller](#)

[Naming features of an app or site - StackExchange](#)

DOCUMENTATION TOOLS

[Docs Like Code - Anne Gentle](#)

[I'd Rather Be Writing - Tom Johnson](#)

[Tools of the Trade - Write the Docs community](#)

WORKING WITH TECH WRITERS

[Startups Looking for a Technical Writer? 6 Tips for Success - Hannah Kirk](#)

[Interviewing & Hiring Technical Writers - Sam Faktorovich](#)

[Guide to Hiring and Getting Hired - Write the Docs Community](#)

WANT DOCUMENTATION THAT STANDS OUT?

You're building a world-changing product. You know that you can deliver something novel that wows users.

It's not enough.

Your sign-up is easy, but weaving your product into users' lives is hard. There's always another product making promises.

Guide and enable customers.

New users come to your product excited. Your docs need to greet them with a friendly smile and help them jump right to the delicious benefits.

The app promised "easy," but one customer doesn't understand where to start. You offered "a better to do list," but new users can't figure out how to import their tasks. Your users need guidance that keeps them excited and makes it easy.

Do you want documentation that stands out?

I've been delivering great documentation that engages readers since 2008.

I can help your organization:

- **Conduct a content audit** to find out where you're winning and losing on docs
- **Define a content strategy** that aligns your marketing and documentation efforts
- **Develop scalable processes** that allow you to maintain docs with limited resources
- **Write content** that impresses users and makes your product sticky

Need to level up your user content? [Book a consultation today](#) and explore how we can help users fall in love with your product.

TESTIMONIALS

In consulting with Frame.io to audit our developer docs, Cory laid out a logical and compelling plan to improve the overall developer experience on our platform. Cory directed our focus to key areas where improvements would be most impactful, and helped us tailor content to the real needs of our audience -- needs that had been sorely overlooked.

Kyle Stone
Developer Relations
at Frame.io

I was constantly in awe of her skill as a writer. I often looked to her content as a model for what the ideal documentation should look like: concise, clear, and user-focused.

Lauren Papotto
Senior Technical Writer
at Veeva Systems

