



Adobe FrameMaker

Adobe FrameMaker vs Adobe InDesign

Comparision for technical documentation

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The challenges

Technical documentation faces two primary challenges: Products get more and more sophisticated and increasingly complex and users need more access to information through different channels. The change towards technical systems and products interacting with each other has a direct impact on our understanding of the way information flows. More and more, information needs to be broken into coherent “chunks” that are adapted and recombined with other bits of information. Technical documentation no longer is a set of instructions set in stone or defined in a fixed process of gathering, bundling, and publishing. As products change, so do the requirements for technical documentation.

Hence, technical documentation is driven by two main aspects: producing technical information within tight schedules efficiently in an ever-increasing variety of languages on the one hand, and the need of its users to access that information any time on any device instantaneously. Adding to this sense of urgency is the ever increasing speed of updates of the products themselves. To keep up with product updates, the requirements for publishing speed and reliability put enormous pressure on the technical documentation. Making it all the more important to have the right tools to accomplish these tasks.

Deciding about the right tool is not a decision easily made since the consequences can be far reaching for years ahead. To help you cope with the decision we need to have a closer look at the tools as well as what their specific features and abilities may mean for the technical publishing process.

The champions

After looking at the needs of technical documentation, there is little doubt that two applications will almost always come out going head-to-head for taking the publishing crown: both applications have their audience and followers who rightly claim the superiority of their respective tools.

Adobe FrameMaker

Adobe FrameMaker easily takes the crown when it comes to longevity and reliability in publishing long and complex documents of sometimes more than 100 → 1,000 pages. But reducing FrameMaker to printed documents would not be fair, as the application can publish HTML5, EPUB® and apps—all from one single source.

The documents themselves may consist of reusable sections and fragments that are formatted consistently throughout the documents.

To help the author stay in control of this vast amount of information, FrameMaker offers sophisticated features such as variables, running headers and footers as well as conditional formats.

Since FrameMaker is built for manipulating large amounts of information, it also offers an unparalleled support for working on structured content, helping the author to create well-formed XML content.

Adobe InDesign

InDesign from Adobe is a different beast: made to produce a high-quality layout for all sorts of marketing communication, the application shines when it comes to beautiful print and refined typography. Originally made for printed output, the application offers unparalleled support for color management, flexible page layouts and arranging content.

As marketing communication faces the same challenges with respect to multichannel output, the application can publish content to EPUB®, retaining a nearly identical layout. The hallmark of InDesign, is its integration into the Adobe Creative Cloud, sharing almost the same interface and user experience with Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator.

The comparison

The following comparison is by no means exhaustive and will cover only the highlights of each application. Its aim is to facilitate the decision-making process, thereby helping to quickly compare features for your specific documentation situation.

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Book building features and long document support

Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Book management	Books control the consistency of all lists, TOCs, and documents. Documents in books can be grouped and excluded from output.	Books are containers with limited functionality. Documents in books can be reordered but not grouped or excluded from output.
Text styles / formats	Decent set of text styles with basic typographic controls. Text formats cannot be inherited. Margin header and run-in styles available.	Books are containers with limited functionality. Documents in books can be reordered but not grouped or excluded from output.
Paragraph numbering	Extensive numbering options for volumes, chapters, sections, lists and headers. Numbering sets can be defined.	Basic numbering styles for chapters, headers and lists. Numbering sets can be defined.
Master pages for page layout	Page layout is defined on master pages.	Page layout is defined on master pages. Master pages can "inherit" layout elements.
Reference pages for building blocks	Objects such as footer lines or TOC formats are configured on reference pages. Reference pages can be updated and distributed across all documents within a book.	N/A
Table of contents (TOC)	Automatically generated from any paragraph or XML element text. Can include entire or partial numbered paragraph prefix. Order of text, leader dots and page numbers can be easily defined. Multiple TOCs are possible. TOCs are placed in specific documents within a book and generated when the book is updated.	Decent set of tools for generating TOC from specific paragraph elements. Limited control over inclusion of numbered paragraph prefixes, etc. Strong control over styles and display of TOC elements. Multiple TOCs are possible. TOCs are placed in documents and not managed by the book document.
List of tables or figures	As TOCs, lists of tables or figures are part of a book and are updated as the book is updated.	Lists of tables and figures can be placed within documents, but must be updated separately.
Index	Index entries may be sorted and displayed in virtually unlimited nested indents. Workspace pod displayed in all index markers sorted in a variety of ways. Character tags may be used to make portions of index entry be bold, italic, etc.	Decent set of tools for creating a simple index without too many levels. Granular control over display of individual words (common to tech doc) not available.
Cross-references	Any paragraph or XML element may be a target of a cross-reference. Special pods display all cross-references in all open documents. Unresolved crossreferences are highlighted. Cross-reference formats can be defined as standardized building blocks.	Any paragraph may be a target of a cross-reference. Special panes display all cross-references in current document. Unresolved cross-references are highlighted. Cross-reference formats can be defined as standardized building blocks.
Fixing unresolved cross-references	Cross-reference pod displays unresolved cross-references and provide hints to missing target text. When a document is opened, FrameMaker warns about unresolved cross-references.	Cross-reference pane displays unresolved cross-references. When output is generated, InDesign warns about unresolved crossreferences.

Document editing

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Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Variables	Variables are controlled from a pod. Often used terms or expressions can be defined as variable and placed within any text.	Often used terms or expressions can be defined as variables and placed within any text. Long multi-word variables cannot break over two lines which can cause layout problems.
Running headers and footers	“Running headers/footers” are placed on master pages to display the actual header on the page. Running headers/footers can be combined. Running headers/footers can be longer than one line of text.	“Running headers/footers” are placed on master pages to display the actual header on the page. A running header/footer has a maximum length of one line of text.
Output to PDF or other formats	FrameMaker output is performed via Acrobat plugin. Responsive HTML5 output is native with extensive styling options. All bookmarks and cross-references as well as interactive elements remain “live” in PDF and HTML5 as well other output formats.	Due to the integrated PDF engine, PDF output is reliable and fast. All bookmarks and cross-references as well as interactive elements remain “live” in PDF and EPUB®.
Footnotes	Complex footnote notation and styles are available in both paragraphs and tables.	Normal footnotes are possible. Table footnotes are not available.
Conditional expressions	Show hide sections of text with conditional tags. Creating complex combinations of conditions to create custom versions of a document with single-source publishing are possible. Conditions are controlled per document with a conditional styles pod.	Show hide sections of text with conditional tags. Conditions are controlled per document with a conditional styles pane.
Modularization	Text modules such as sections or safety warnings can be managed separately as “text insets”. Text insets live outside of documents and can be placed within any text flow.	Modularization is possible, but inconvenient, as text modules are placed as separate objects, not within a text flow.
Regular expression support in search	Search with regular expression based on grep, eGrep or PERL.	Search with GREP is possible.
Auto-save	FrameMaker auto-saves documents within a configurable interval to prevent data loss after a crash.	InDesign auto-saves a configurable number of documents to prevent data loss after a crash.
Review PDF	Save files for PDF review with Acrobat Reader. Import comments, deletions and annotations “in place” back into FrameMaker source files.	Comments cannot be re-imported into InDesign.
Layers and spreads	N/A	Text layers contain objects and can be set to hide (e.g. watermarks). Text spreads (pages) can be reordered to reflect printed output.
Color management	N/A	Uses color management for consistency across the Adobe Creative Cloud applications.
Advanced spell-checking and hyphenation with DUDEN for German	Uses the advanced spell-checking and hyphenation engine from DUDEN for German.	Uses the advanced spell-checking and hyphenation engine from DUDEN for German.

XML and structured authoring

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Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Role-based XML authoring	FrameMaker is a full-featured XML and DITA editor. Authors have three views: XML View, Authoring View, and WYSIWYG View. Full XML editing is possible in all three views. It is also easier now to hide menus and customize workspaces. The structure tree to navigate long documents is configurable, showing only parts of the text or the longer form.	A simple structured tree view is available, as well as a view of XML code. Style mapping formats pre-defined (and well-formed) XML on import: elements are mapped to formats.
Ability to edit DITA or XML files directly	Can use structured applications that will support native *.xml files, not just *.fm binary files with embedded structure.	N/A
Full DITA 1.2 and XSLT 2.0 and XSLT 3.0 support	Virtually all DITA constructs are supported. EDD (FrameMaker-specific element definition documents) allows complex nesting of elements and automatic insertion of sibling elements.	N/A
Configure DITA editing for beginners	Possible elements according to rules are suggested.	N/A
XML view: Code completing and error tracking	When authoring in XML view, the author is prompted for valid elements only. When an element is entered, the "closing" element is automatically added. Misplaced elements (invalid elements) are flagged in the structure tree.	N/A
Expandable DITA map topics for quick viewing of content	Traditional "tree" view of structure tree can be switched to a compiled view with expandable/collapsible sections.	N/A
Quick Element toolbar for easy, visual insertion of common structure elements	Create new XML elements with a convenient icon bar.	N/A
Smart paste of unstructured content into DITA	Convert unstructured portions of Word docs, HTML, etc. into valid DITA by "smart pasting" into a structured document.	N/A
XSLT support for transforms	XML can be transformed through custom XSLT when opening or saving the XML file. Integrated Saxon Enterprise Edition for high-performance XML Transformations.	N/A
"Intelliprompt" for elements and attributes	Authoring in XML mode will prompt user to choose correct element or attribute.	N/A
Expert mode for XML and DITA	Technical users who prefer to directly manipulate and author XML markup can work in XML view, with no preview of page output.	N/A
Easily customize and constrain DITA while staying standard compliant.	Easily customize and constrain the complex DITA standard for your personal/corporate requirements with an easy to use visual step-by-step assistant.	N/A
Navigate through complex XML documents	Use the XML Structure View to easily navigate through complex documents and move elements around in the structure. Use the breadcrumb navigation to quick-access parent elements of an element.	N/A
XPATH 2.0 support	Use the XPATH 2.0 to build complex expressions to find XML elements and attributes.	N/A

Automated authoring, input and output

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Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Scripting	Supports ExtendScript and custom plug-ins via FDK to automate tasks associated with high-volume production. Third-party plugins and scripts help to generate complex output like packaging for printers (collecting all files and fonts for output).	ExtendScript and various third-party tools to automate tasks is available. Packaging for printers (collecting all files and fonts for output) is available without plugins.
Libraries	N/A	Recurring contents (images, text styles, colors etc.) can be placed and managed in Creative Cloud libraries. CC libraries can be shared with other authors.
Import from other editors	Imports existing Microsoft Word files (RTF, DOC and DOCX) with style mapping (paragraph formats from Word are imported as FrameMaker formats). Support for Microsoft Word 2016, Microsoft Excel 2016, and RTF 1.9.	Imports Existing Microsoft Word files (RTF, DOC) with style mapping (paragraph formats from Word are imported as InDesign formats). Support for Microsoft Word 2007 and Microsoft Excel 2007.
Export to other editors	Export to other	N/A
Support for WebP images	Support for WebP images for import and publishing.	N/A
Support for Icon images (.ico)	Support for icon image format for import and publishing.	N/A
Support for image transparency and opacity	Basic Support for image transparency. Opacity can be adjusted in %.	Basic Support for image transparency. Opacity can be adjusted in %. Blending mode can be adjusted.
Support for Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG).	Support for Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) for import and publishing.	N/A

Easy translation support

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Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Out-of-the-box translation support	Reach global audiences by leveraging the all-new translation support to export XLIFF files for your content. Simply import the translated content back into FrameMaker.	There is no out-of-the-box translation support in InDesign.
Pre-segmented XLIFF for easier translation	Make the translation of content vendor and tool agnostic with the new Export-Import XLIFF engine in FrameMaker. Generate pre-segmented XLIFF 1.2 output that can be understood by any translation vendor with ease.	There is no native support for XLIFF in InDesign

Publishing to tablets and mobile

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Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Multiple print formats in one document	N/A	Use the Liquid Layout of InDesign to automatically adapt content when you create an alternate layout with different size or orientation in InDesign. Works for PDF.
Responsive HTML5 output	Publish to HTML5 ("responsive") without additional software.	N/A
Native mobile app output	With Adobe PhoneGap license, you may instantly generate standalone phone or tablet mobile apps.	Can be accomplished via Adobe Digital Publishing Suite.
EPUB® 3 output	Available	Available
CHM output	Available	Requires additional software or services.
Amazon Kindle support	Available	Requires additional software or services.

Role-based publishing

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Feature	FrameMaker	InDesign
Custom workspaces	Workspaces can be customized and "named" to match tasks for specific users and specific tasks.	Workspaces can be customized and "named" to match tasks for specific users and specific tasks. Workspaces can be saved on Creative Cloud to be available on multiple devices with one CC account.
Hide all or part of pull-down menus	Setting to make unwanted formatting or other pull-down menus unavailable.	N/A

The decision

Both applications are very capable tools to produce world-class documents in a wide variety of different languages and flavors with each having its own strength in their respective category. The main difference between both applications has been for years that InDesign allows for more flexibility at the cost of consistency, whereas FrameMaker honors the structured and consistent approach to meet the tight deadlines and requirements of technical communication.

The decision between both powerhouses of the publishing world should be based upon the requirements within the technical documentation. There are more factors coming into play when pitting one tool against the other.

People

An important factor to be considered is the skill set of the people working with the tools: How fast will they be proficient enough to master the publishing process reliably? Do they use the tools correctly to meet stringent deadlines? How well does the tool help them to stay focused on their goals?

Process

In a more abstract sense: How fast can the process be adapted to changing product requirements? Does multi-channel publishing provide enough “wiggle-room” for new languages, for new devices, or new product variants? Can the process be scaled up to incorporate more departments and more products without having to start all over again?

Tools

Technical publication needs a range of software tools to accomplish its task of delivering the right information at the right time to the user. Besides using a tool for editing the text-based information and putting it all together for publishing in a consistent manner, additional tools for editing the images, graphics and managing the information are necessary. Starting with the needs of the editing process itself for drafts, corrections, storing information and staying in control of the publishing process itself, the need for the tools to interact with each other within the publishing process is of utmost importance to efficiency.

How well does the “tool zoo” interact with each other? Is there a need for a conversion process to “translate” between the tools? Should the publications be exported and imported just for exchange between departments? Constant migration can be a show-stopper, so how well can the tools interact with each other?

Conclusion

We hope this document helps you make a well-informed decision when it comes to the future of your publishing process.

We encourage you to test drive both applications and then decide on which one best fulfills your needs.

For a personalized demo or questions

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