

# The Differences Between Print and Online Material

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## Introduction

There are several differences between print and online materials that are important for a technical writer to keep in mind when it comes to designing a document. This document highlights those differences as far as content, layout & design, and navigation are concerned, and also explains when print or online would be the more appropriate document type.

## Print vs. Online

There are times when it is more appropriate for a technical writer to produce print material or online material. For example, a user manual for a car should be produced as a print document, because a mechanic might not have access to a computer in his or her repair bay, and a car owner would find it more useful to keep a copy of the manual in their car in case of emergency.

On the other hand, the documentation for an online service such as a website, would make more sense as an online document. The user would expect to find the documentation online, and might need to access the information on a laptop when they would not be near a printed manual at their home or office.

It is important for a technical writer to consider the circumstances under which the user will be accessing the document when they are creating the document, and to choose an appropriate document type. The technical writer also has to consider the differences between print and online material when they are creating their document.

The advantages and disadvantages of print and online documents are summarized in Table 1: Print vs. Online.

Table 1: Print vs. Online

<b>Print</b>	<b>Online</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Print documents are portable.</li><li>• There is an existing schemata, users are more familiar with print material.</li><li>• Print documents can be annotated.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Easy to update.</li><li>• Less expensive to produce.</li><li>• Can make use of a search engine.</li></ul>

## Content

The differences between the content of print and online documents are summarized in Table 2: Content.

Table 2: Content

<b>Print</b>	<b>Online</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tend to be longer than online documents.</li> <li>• Includes conceptual information with procedural information (e.g. "About printing" with "To print the document").</li> <li>• Examples of suitable print documents include: reference books, user manuals (especially for hardware), textbooks, and long documents that require the user to read (as opposed to scan) information.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited conceptual information (e.g. has "To print the document" but maybe not "About printing") because it focuses on task-related information.</li> <li>• Procedures have very simple steps.</li> <li>• Content is written so it is scannable: lots of headings, less text than print, simple and short sentences, and logically organized.</li> <li>• Examples of online documents include: Web site content, online help systems, e-learning, user manuals (particularly software)</li> </ul>

## Layout& Design

The differences between the layout and design of printed and online documents are summarized in Table 3: Layout & Design.

Table 3: Layout & Design

<b>Print</b>	<b>Online</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print (usually a serif) font, such as Times New Roman or Garamond.</li> <li>• Increasing trend toward chunked information, but long paragraphs are common.</li> <li>• Information presents well in hardcopy and is geared towards a hardcopy user (e.g. a car repair manual).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online (usually sans serif) font such as Verdana or Arial.</li> <li>• More white space than print.</li> <li>• Lacks book structure of chapters.</li> <li>• No pagination.</li> <li>• Screens are "alive" and the layout and design must look</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information presents well in a linear (non-hyperlinked) fashion (e.g. a complicated textbook).</li> <li>• Color is not as important.</li> <li>• Has pagination.</li> <li>• Less white space than online.</li> <li>• Headers and footers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• good on an active screen.</li> <li>• No headers or footers.</li> <li>• More generous use of and need for color (contrast).</li> <li>• Layered information, organized in the way users need to access it—important information is seen first.</li> <li>• User needs to “drill down” to less important or related information.</li> <li>• Information presents well online and in a non-linear fashion (e.g. a course in learning how to write for the Web)</li> </ul>
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## Navigation

The differences between the navigation of printed and online documents are summarized in Table 4: Navigation.

*Table 4: Navigation*

<b>Print</b>	<b>Online</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Index</li> <li>• Table of contents</li> <li>• Cross-references (e.g. see page 30; for more information, see page 60)</li> <li>• Headers and footers</li> <li>• Subheadings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperlinks to layer information (and provide user with an opportunity to learn more detail).</li> <li>• Possibly an index, but with fewer nested layers than hardcopy.</li> <li>• Very often a search function.</li> <li>• Possibly an online TOC as in online help or menus as in Web pages.</li> <li>• Perhaps an overall map, such as a Web site map or information portal home page.</li> <li>• Conclusion</li> </ul>

## **Conclusion**

There are several differences between print and online materials that are important for a technical writer to keep in mind when it comes to designing a document. It is important for a technical writer to consider the circumstances under which the user will be accessing the document when they are creating the document, and to choose an appropriate document type. The technical writer also has to consider the differences between print and online material when they are creating their document.