



Technical writing and the role of AI

Oliver Fischer

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As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly widespread in businesses, you might be wondering how you can integrate AI into your workflow as a technical writer. The following article addresses background information on the state of AI, important information you should be aware of as a technical writer, and examples of how you can integrate AI into your workflow.

Copyright matters

Copyright is an important aspect for any writer, even more so if you are employed by a company and may not be the sole copyright holder of the content you produce. One of the main concerns when it comes to AI-generated content is copyright. The laws and regulations around copyright and AI are still developing, but based on some recent available rulings, we can get a clear idea of what technical writers can and cannot do with AI today.

First, a reminder of how the U.S. government defines copyright:

“Copyright is a form of protection grounded in the U.S. Constitution and granted by law for original works of authorship fixed in a tangible medium of expression. Copyright covers both published and unpublished works.” - [U.S. Copyright Office](#) (September 2023)

U.S. copyright law is extensive and detailed. To learn more, see [Copyright Law of the United States](#) (Dec. 2022). The role of AI in copyright law is being discussed and developed right now. You can learn more about ongoing discussions by reading the following resource:

- [Works Containing Material Generated by Artificial Intelligence](#) (Mar. 2023)
- [Registration Guidance Webinar](#) (Jun. 2023)

Another important quote to keep in mind is the following:

“In the Office’s view, it is well-established that copyright can protect only material that is the product of human creativity.” - [Works Containing Material Generated by Artificial Intelligence](#) (Mar. 2023)

Based on the existing laws and regulation around copyright, the following applies to technical writers:

- The documentation you create as a tech writer is copyrighted.
- Your content is intellectual property (IP) that creates value for your organization and its customers.
- Organizations need copyright for legal reasons, particularly if they ever need to engage in lawsuits.

How copyright laws affect AI content

So what does this mean for AI? In short, the following table summarizes who can copyright works:

Author	Copyrightable
Human	Yes
Non-human	No
AI	It depends

The reason that “it depends” for AI is because two additional factors determine if you can copyright AI content:

1. To what extent did you use AI in your work?
2. Did you disclose if and how you used AI?

Regarding the extent of AI used in your work, copyright law, as of September 2023, assumes that AI plays an assistive role in authorship. That means AI cannot be the sole creative driving force or author when creating content. The next topic will discuss the difference between an author and assisting role in more detail. For now, keep in mind that organizations who offer

copyrighted product documentation to customers will still need technical writers in the foreseeable future.

Regarding disclosure, your documentation also cannot be registered as copyrighted material if you use AI-generated content and you do not track and disclose what part of the content is authored by you (presumably a human) as opposed to what is authored by AI. Disclosure can be as simple as a written statement accompanying your work.

Using AI in product documentation

There are different AI offerings that can help you achieve a variety of goals. AI agents based on large language models (LLMs) will likely be the most useful to technical writers, so the following sections are written in the contexts of LLMs.

Regardless of what models you are using, it's important to distinguish between AI-authored and AI-assisted content, which we touched on in the previous section. See the following table to see some detailed definitions and examples:

Comment

Authorship type	Description	Example
AI-authored	AI-generated content with minimal human input.	Asking a LLM to write a story about a princess being rescued by a knight by using a single sentence prompt.
AI-assisted	Human-generated content that is modified by generative AI.	Writing a newspaper article by hand after conducting interviews and asking a LLM to edit the article according to AP style.

AI-assisted workflow

For product documentation, an AI-assisted workflow, which will allow you to copyright your work as is necessary in most organizations, might look similar to the following flow:

Create original content → Use generative AI to modify original content → Make edits and finalize the content

Make sure not to copy-paste AI-generated content unless you have systems in place to differentiate between human and AI content. Otherwise, it will be difficult or even impossible to provide the necessary disclosure for copyright to apply.

AI-assisted use case: Custom GPT

An efficient way to modify your original content is by using generative AI that adheres to a set of rules provided by you. You can manually tell the AI which rules to follow, but a more efficient method, if you are using ChatGPT for example, is to set up a custom GPT.

When creating a custom GPT, you can use the **Prompt** field to define the purpose and behavior. You can then add references such as style guides or other supporting resources that help support how you want to integrate the AI into your workflow.

Make sure to test your custom GPT and make continuous adjustments as needed.

AI-assisted use case: Iterate and refine

AI is far from perfect. In an AI-assisted use case, you can improve outputs by iterating and refining content. You can use a variety of prompts to help you refine outputs when asking AI to modify content. If you need some inspiration, Margaret Efron shares some prompts that she uses regularly in her article [10 Iterative ChatGPT Prompts I Use Everyday](#).

You can keep iterating the AI outputs until you are happy with the results and are ready for a final round of human editing. Make sure to verify technical accuracy because LLMs have a [tendency to make up information](#). You can also correct the output directly in your AI chat interface, which allows your AI agent to remember those corrections for the duration of your session. For example, you can use this to correct factual mistakes in the generated output.

AI-assisted: Other use cases

Using generative AI as a technical writer doesn't have to be confined to modifying your existing content. Technical writers fill a variety of roles and responsibilities that can benefit from AI. See the following list of examples of how you might use AI for a variety of workflows as a technical writer:

- Brainstorm ideas and generate outlines.

- Draft sections.
- Edit and proofread.
- Answer technical questions about your product and improve your own understanding.
- Research assistance.
- Write scripts for automating your workflow.
- Create examples of configuration files and explain them.
- Create sample commands.
- Use advanced search tool for local content.

Future opportunities for tech writers

AI technologies are still developing and shaping the corporate world as we speak. A frequent concern is the displacement of existing jobs by AI, including tech writing. While copyright laws prevent this in the US, at least for the moment, tech writers can also seek new opportunities created by AI. For example, generative AI tools need documentation themselves. Developing user support chatbots may be another area where tech writers will be needed to provide training data or evaluating bot-user interactions, for example.

Using chatbots and final notes

Before using generative AI as a tech writer, make sure to confirm with your organization or company if they have any rules or regulations concerning the use of AI. In some cases, you might not be permitted to use any AI. In other cases, there might be limitations as to which models you are allowed to use. Rules can vary greatly from organization to organization, so you must get clear permissions.

Additionally, using AI in a corporate setting can pose risks for the company as well. While not always the case, you can generally assume that information you enter into an LLM-based AI, such as ChatGPT for example, is recorded. This can result in company secrets being leaked, as was the case with [Samsung](#). Be clear about what information you are allowed to enter. Some companies have clear restrictions on what information you can use. To work around this issue, your company can create its own AI instance where it has control over the data.

Generative AI also has general limitations, which include inconsistencies, inaccuracies, context limitations, and sometimes hallucinations leading to factually incorrect information in the output. It's important to keep these limitations in mind when using generative AI.

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