

How to Estimate a Documentation Project

Here are some rule-of-thumb guidelines for estimating documentation projects. These figures are based on two years of timesheet data from a large documentation and training department.

If you use more than one of these approaches at the same time, and average between them, you can usually get a good rough grasp on what things will cost.

Ask: Do you know approximately how many pages the final product will be?

Then: Divide the number of pages in two to get the number of person-days required to write the documentation. Writing new documents from scratch takes 3-4 hours per page. This estimate will include editing time and SME interviews.

Ask: Is this an update to existing documentation? How many pages are in the existing documentation? What percentage needs to be updated?

Then: Divide the number of pages that need to be updated by four to get the number of person-days required to update the documentation. Updates of existing materials take 1-2 hours per page. Adding new material takes 3-4 hours per page.

Ask: If this is documentation for a software project, what is the total budget for development of the software?

Then: Documentation should cost about 10% of the total development cost of a new software project.

Ask: If this is documentation for a software project, how many person-days did it take to develop the software?

Then: Documentation should take about 10% of the total person-days needed to develop the software.

Ask: Do you know approximately how many tasks are to be explained in the documentation?

Then: Multiply the number of tasks by two to determine the number of pages in the final product. It takes about two pages to explain one task.

Ask: Do you know how many illustrations will be required?

Then: Divide the number of illustrations by four to get the number of number of graphic-artist person-days required to do illustrations. Original illustrations take from 1-3 hours each to prepare.

Don't forget to add project management time (usually at least 10%)!