

Videos and minimalism, a conflict in technical writing

R. BUKALA, C. FERRO, F. VINGTROIS

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Throughout our technical writing courses, we learned that we must implement a minimalist approach to our writing. Technical documentation must be straight to the point, simplify access to information, and filter out any unnecessary details. Minimalism in technical writing has been clearly defined since the 1980s. This definition and the advice on minimalist practices leave out visual elements such as illustrations and videos even though videos are becoming ever more present in technical documentation. Thus, we decided to make the distinction between written and visual minimalism. As visual minimalism stems from minimalism, we can define it as simplifying technical documentation by cutting off all unnecessary visual content.

Through this research article, we wished to study how visual minimalism and videos are used in technical documentation. Specifically, we wondered how technical writers perceived the use of videos in the context of visual minimalism.

As technical communicators can work on a large variety of projects, we wanted to reach as many professionals in technical communication as possible to ask their opinions on the matter. Are videos and minimalist documentation compatible?

Keywords: technical writing, e-learning, minimalism, visual minimalism, video, illustration

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We also wish to thank everyone who took the time to answer our survey. This enabled us to have proper testimonies to analyze and form an opinion.

Introduction

Minimalism in technical documentation is based on John Millar Carroll's work in the 1980s. He coined the term "minimalism" and, since then, it has been one of the most used approaches in technical writing. As technical communicators ourselves, one of our first lessons on technical writing was to learn how to write in a more minimalist way. Minimalism can be described as only writing necessary information, focusing on the action rather than the description, and using simple language. To give a minimalist definition of minimalism, minimalism is a simplified and action-focused approach to writing technical documentation.

As this definition shows, the minimalist approach focuses on writing. However, many technical communicators don't solely write text, they also have to work with illustrations, and sometimes even videos, since they have become more frequent in technical communication these past few years. However, the use of illustrations was never mentioned in any of the definitions of minimalism that we found. This is why we deemed it necessary to make a distinction between written minimalism and visual minimalism.

We define written minimalism the same way minimalism is traditionally defined in technical writing (*see the definition of minimalism above*). However, we can define visual minimalism as an approach to technical writing that aims at simplifying documentation by removing all unnecessary visual content.

Throughout our studies and apprenticeship, we got interested in how visual minimalism applies to technical documentation, and whether it had an impact on how technical writers use illustrations and videos. Our research article seeks to answer the following question: How do technical communicators perceive the use of videos in the context of visual minimalism?

To answer this question, we will analyze the answers of 40 technical communicators to our survey. We currently have two hypotheses: the use of visual minimalism depends on the technical communicator's years of work experience, and the perception of the use of videos depends on the technical communicator's field of work. The analysis of the survey could enable us to draw new hypotheses.

Methods

The Survey

To gather the necessary data for this research project, we conducted a survey. We tried to make it as short and easy to complete as possible to avoid discouraging respondents.

The survey was created on Google Forms and sent to other technical communicators via LinkedIn, a mailing list, and professional contacts. We tried to reach out to professionals from every field of technical communication because, even between us three, our experiences on the subject varied.

We decided to write the questions and answers in French and in English to reach as many people as possible. Another advantage that we got from using both languages was that we didn't have to translate the questions and answers to present the results of the survey in this article. Indeed, sometimes some ideas can be modified because of translation.

Documentary research

In addition to our survey, we used several scientific articles and technical writing blog posts as research materials. Finding information on minimalism in technical writing wasn't difficult, but, as mentioned earlier, the visual aspects are never discussed. We then focused on how illustrations and videos are used in technical writing, in hopes of finding how to link it to minimalism.

Finding research material wasn't easy, but we got interesting pieces of information from research articles written by former students of our master's program.

Results

Who are our respondents?

Out of the 40 respondents, 82.5% are technical writers, including one who is also a UX writer and another who is also a knowledge manager. 12.5% of the others are e-learning specialists. As for the rest, one person indicated working in UX design and another one in internal communication [see Fig. 1 below].

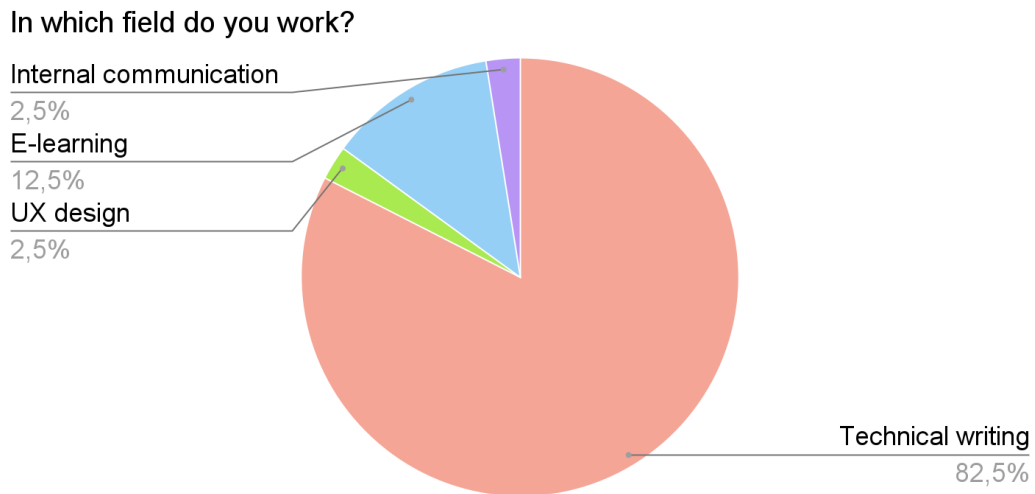


Figure 1 - In which field do you work? Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

22.5% of our respondents have been working in technical communication for less than 2 years, and 20% from 2 to 4 years. Most of our respondents have been working in technical communication for more than 5 years. Indeed, 30% of them have been working in technical communication for 5 to 7 years, and 27.5% for more than 7 years [see Fig. 2 below].

How long have you been working in technical communication?

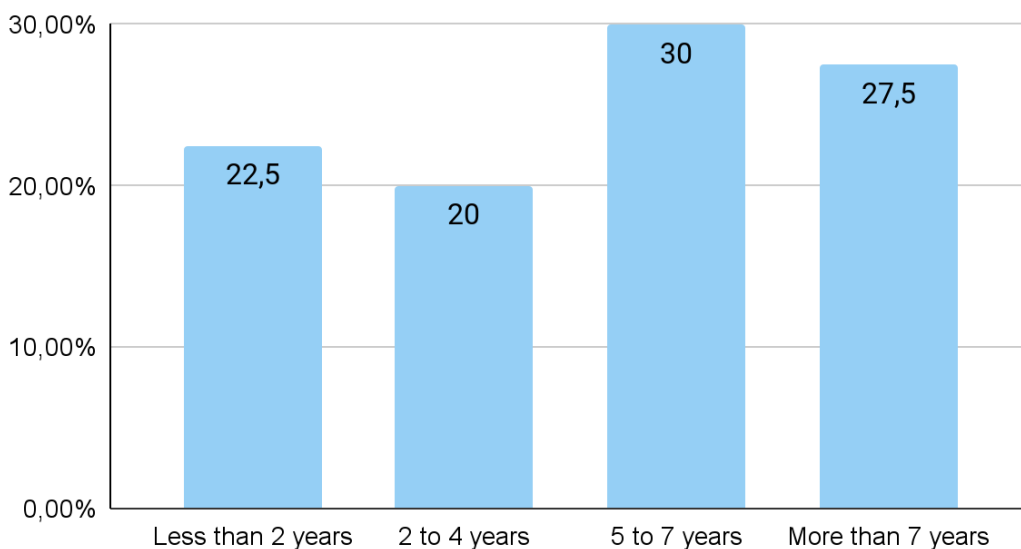


Figure 2 - How long have you been working in technical communication? Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

Our respondents' stance regarding visual minimalism

All our respondents indicated using illustrations for their documentation, but not with the same frequency. 55% of the technical communicators who answered our survey indicated using illustrations “often”, 30% answered “sometimes”, and 15% answered “rarely”. None of the respondents answered “never”.

We also analyzed this question according to the respondents' field of work. Among the respondents who work in technical writing, 53% answered “often”, 28% chose “sometimes”, and 19% answered “rarely”. Regarding the respondents who work in e-learning, 60% of them answered “often” while 40% chose “sometimes”.

When we asked the respondents if they implemented visual minimalism in their documentation, 85% answered “yes”, while 15% chose “no”. We checked the answers of every respondent and compared them to their years of work experience in technical communication. 11% of the respondents who have been working in technical communication for less than 2 years answered that they don't implement visual minimalism. The respondents who have the biggest proportion that doesn't implement visual minimalism are the ones who have been working in technical communication for 2 to 4 years and the ones working for 5 to 7 years (25% for both). Among the respondents who have been working in technical communication for more than 7 years, all of them answered that they implemented visual minimalism [see Fig. 3 below].

Respondents who implement visual minimalism according to their years of work experience in technical communication

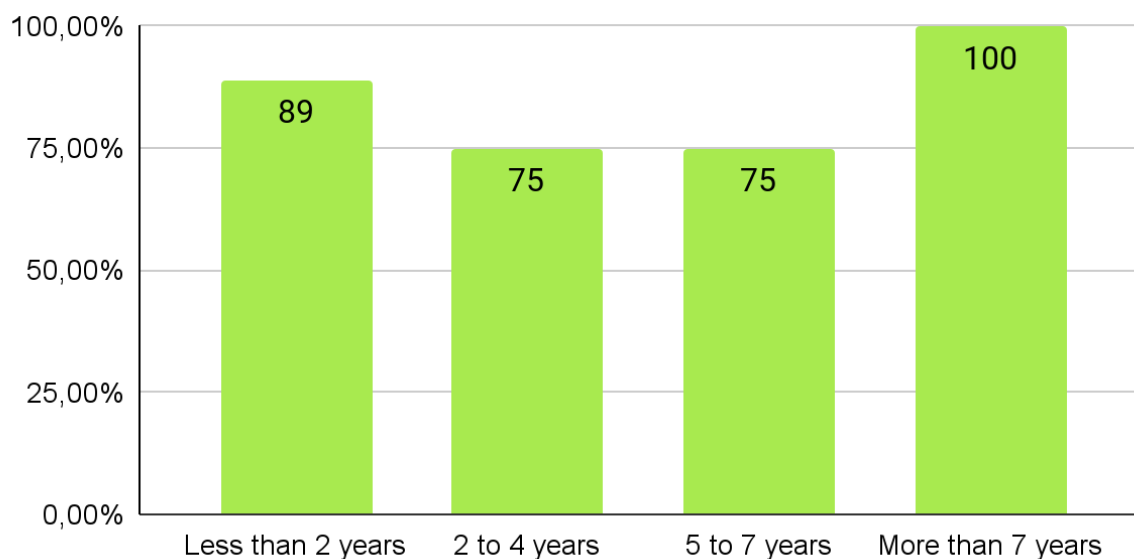


Figure 3 - Respondents who implement visual minimalism according to their years of work experience in technical communication. Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

We then asked them why they implemented visual minimalism in their documentation; the respondents could select multiple answers. 67.5% answered that the documentation was easier to maintain and update. The same percentage of technical communicators answered that, with visual minimalism, the user could better read the documentation. 40.5% of the respondents answered that creating the documentation took less time thanks to visual minimalism. 13.5% considered that implementing visual minimalism was more cost-effective. Two people (5.5%) answered that they didn't implement visual minimalism, and three others haven't answered this question. Three respondents entered their own answers, one said that they sometimes implemented illustrations to explain complex information. Another one answered that they implemented visual minimalism because the illustrations with text were not translated. The last one said that visual minimalism enabled better accessibility [see Fig. 4 below].

Why do you implement visual minimalism?

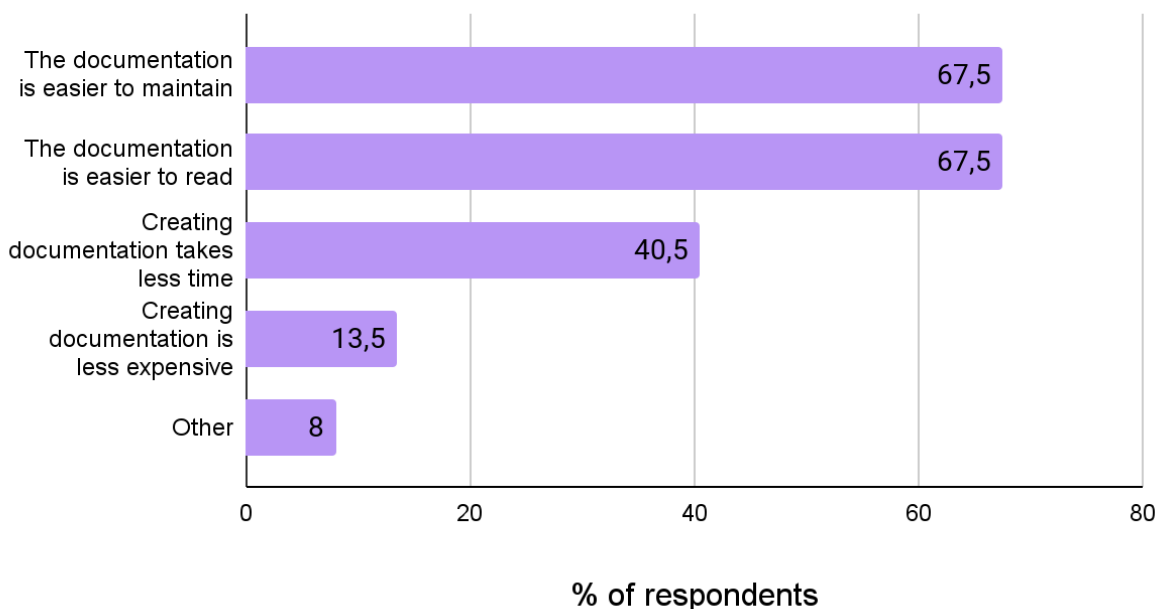


Figure 4 - Why do you implement visual minimalism? Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

Our respondents' stand on videos

Most of our respondents (60%) created at least one video for their work. Among them, 79% said they created a video to accompany the documentation, while 21% created a video to replace the documentation [see Fig. 5 below].

Among the respondents who work in technical writing, 56% of them answered that they created videos, while all of the respondents who work in e-learning answered that they created at least one video.

Have you ever created a video for your work?

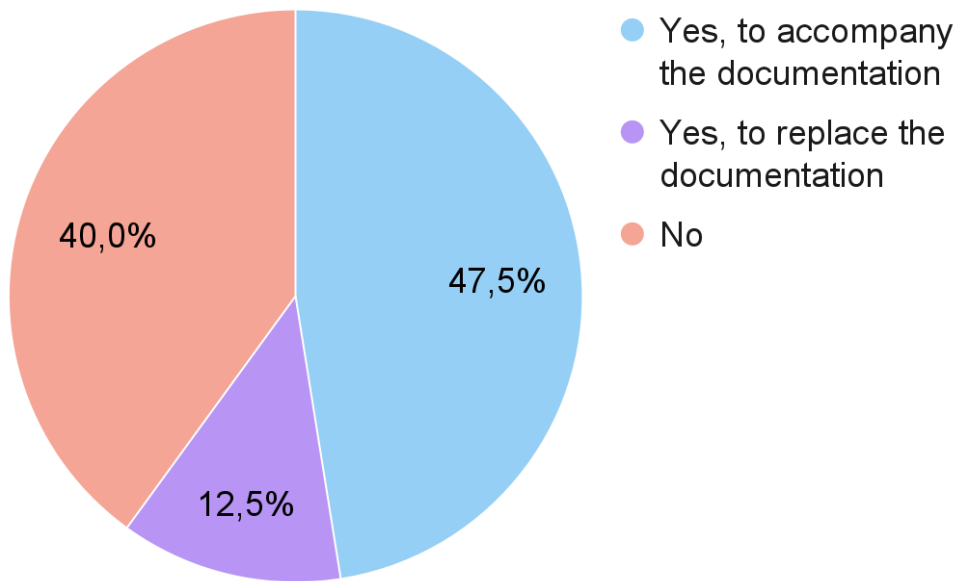


Figure 5 - Have you created a video for your work? Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

As for their reason for creating videos: 42% of the respondents declared that, most of the time, they created videos because they or their team got the idea, 23% said it was because their superior demanded it, another 23% said another department of the company requested it, while the last portion of respondents answered that they created the video following a user's request [see Fig. 6 below].

Most of the time, do you create a video because:

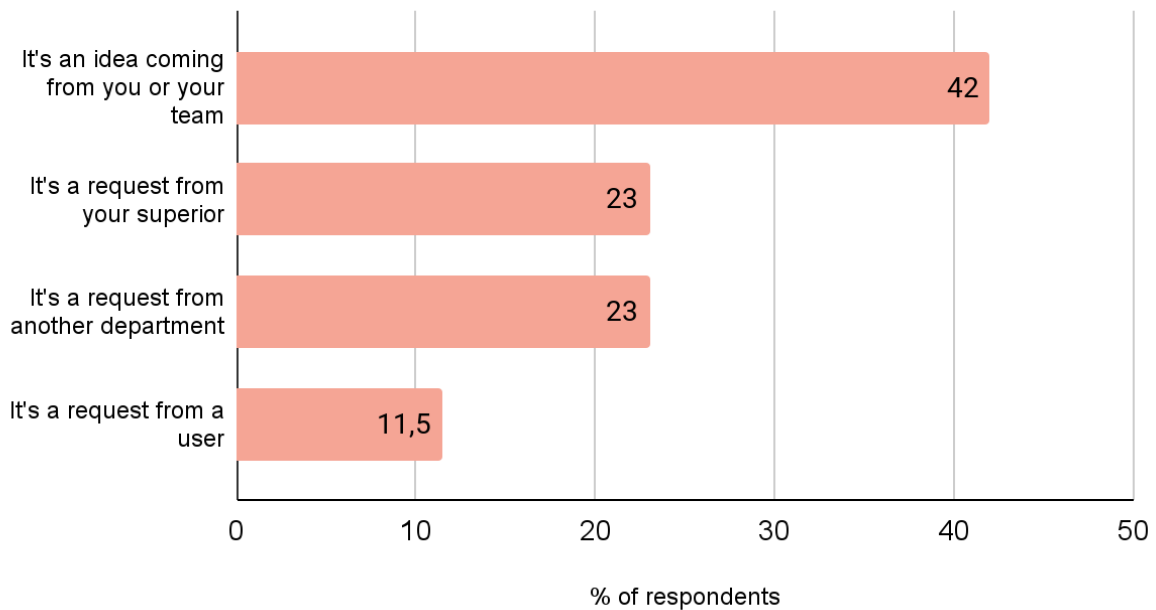


Figure 6 - Most of the time, do you create a video because: Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

When grading the importance of videos in their documentation from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important), 60% of the respondents graded it on the lower half of the scale. The grade that got the most answers is 2, which was chosen by almost 42% of the respondents [see Fig. 7 below].

How important are videos in your documentation?

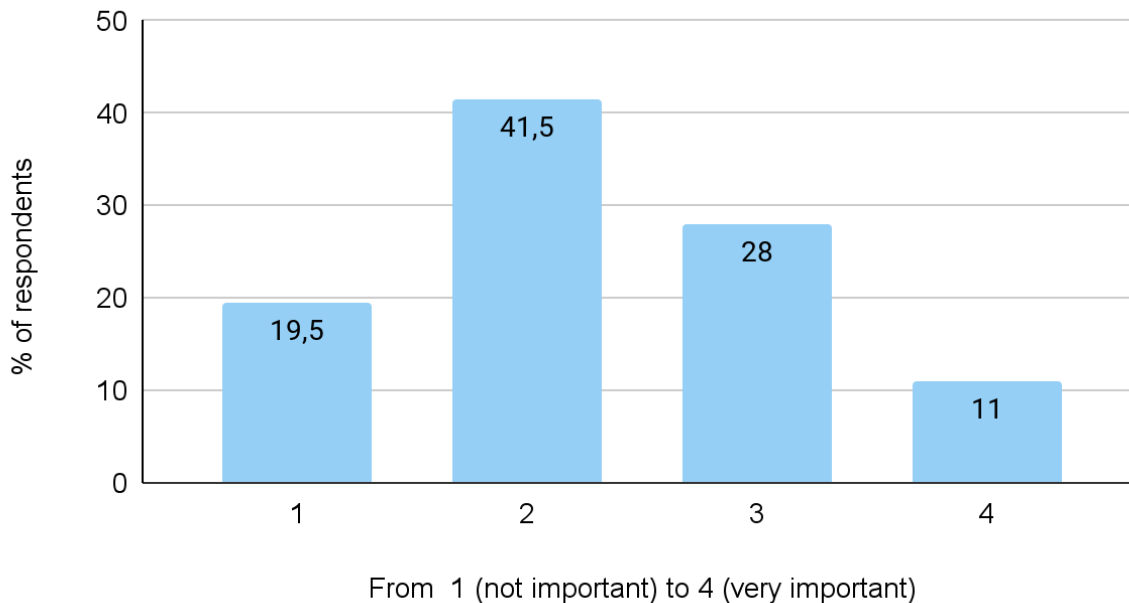


Figure 7 - How important are videos in your documentation? Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

Then, we asked the respondents to indicate the advantages of videos; the respondents could select multiple answers. Most respondents (71%) find videos useful to illustrate textual documentation. 53% of the respondents found videos catchy, and 45% declared that videos were useful to summarize information. 29% of the respondents think that videos are fun. The respondents could also enter their own answers. Three respondents said that videos help show the user how to do a procedure. One respondent answered that videos were useful to give the context of the information. Two respondents said videos were better for users who preferred visual formats.

Regarding the downsides of videos, 90% of the respondents answered that videos took too long to create. 64% declared that videos must be updated too often, and 56% find videos costly. 36% of the respondents declared that the editing skills required to make a video were a downside, and 5% find that the information in videos is too summarized and therefore not precise. The respondents could also enter their own answers. One respondent declared that videos were impossible to maintain. Another one said that videos must often be remade from scratch to be updated, which is time-consuming. Three respondents declared that specific information is difficult to find in a video. Another respondent finds videos too distracting.

As for the main difficulties that the respondents face when using or creating videos, 81.5% of the respondents answered that maintaining the video up to date was one of the main difficulties. 18.5% find that editing the

video is one of the main difficulties and 15% consider that adapting the content to the video format is one of their main difficulties. One respondent added their own answer, they said that making the voice-over was one of their main difficulties while creating videos.

When asked to grade how much they would recommend using videos for technical documentation from 1 (definitely not) to 4 (yes, definitely), the respondents were equally divided. 50% placed themselves on the lower half of the scale, while the other 50% chose the higher half of the scale. The grade that got the most answers (45%) was 2 [see Fig. 8 below].

Do you advise the use of video for technical communication?

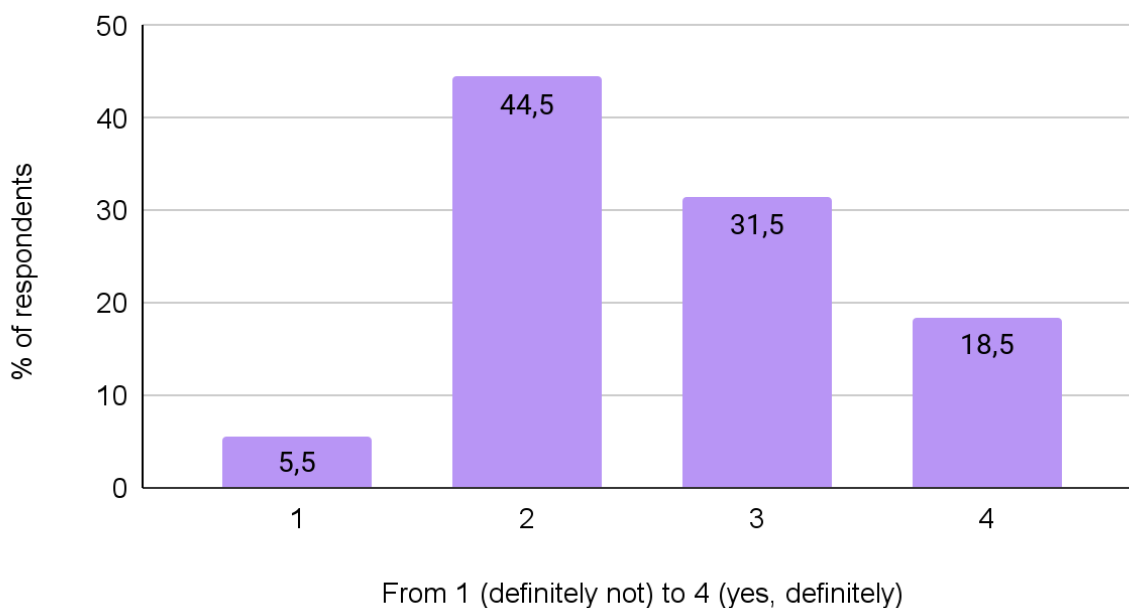


Figure 8 - Do you advise the use of video for technical communication? Survey on 40 respondents, July 2023.

When asked whether they thought videos could be minimalist, 85% of our respondents answered “yes”, while 15% said “no”.

Finally, the respondents could add a comment. 7 respondents entered a comment, they are available in [Appendix 1](#). Most of the comments are in French.

Discussion

Our hypothesis before diving into the results was that the perception of videos depended on the field the technical communicator worked. For instance, an e-learning expert will have a different stand on videos than a technical writer who wrote user manuals.

Regarding visual minimalism, we thought that the professional's years of work experience in technical communication impacted their view on visual minimalism.

Visual minimalism is the basis of technical writing

When we asked our professor what she thought about visual minimalism, she answered that it was the basis of technical writing. This idea seems to be shared by others, as a respondent told us the same in the comment they added at the end of the survey [see [Appendix 1](#)]. However, as our survey showed, 15% of the technical communicators who answered our survey do not implement visual minimalism, even though all our respondents implement illustrations in their documentation.

To verify if this was related to their work experience in technical communication, we checked the answers to the question *Do you implement visual minimalism in your documentation?* and compared them to the answer to *How long have you been working in technical communication?*. Contrary to what we thought, more respondents who recently started working in technical communication implement visual minimalism than the respondents with 2 to 7 years of work experience. However, all respondents with more than 7 years of experience in technical communication answered that they implemented visual minimalism. From the data we gathered, there doesn't seem to be any direct correlation between the years of work experience and whether the technical communicators implement visual minimalism.

Something worth noting however is that, since 85% of respondents implement visual minimalism, visual minimalism is largely implemented. And, as our professor suggested, visual minimalism is likely the basis of technical writing (along with written minimalism) even though illustrations are never mentioned in the definition of minimalism.

The field of work impacts the use of illustrations and videos

To verify our other hypothesis, we compared the answers of e-learning experts and technical writers to two questions: *Do you use illustrations for your documentation?* and *Have you ever created a video for your work?*

From a pedagogical standpoint, having a visual document is useful to directly show the information and keep the learner focused. In e-learning animations and videos are frequently used to make the lesson more dynamic and accessible. Illustrations and videos are also the best option for learners with a visual learning style. So, while we expected the use of videos from e-learning experts, we were surprised at how many technical writers used videos.

As for the 44% of technical writers who answered that they don't implement videos, we deduced that they worked in a sector where videos are not adapted to their writing. For instance, if they are working in the aerospace or defense industries, they probably follow norms such as the S-1000D norm that encourages a scarce use of figures.

There is also the possibility that among these 44%, some technical writers refused to make videos, or that someone else in their team makes them.

Using videos isn't minimalist, but videos can be minimalist

The minimalist approach to technical documentation has multiple advantages. The Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) explains that minimalism helps users read and understand the documentation, and is particularly beneficial for non-native speakers. Moreover, minimalism enables to cut down translation costs because there are fewer words to translate. Archbee, a company that produces technical documentation tools, gives other advantages to minimalism such as: reducing technical writers' workload and lowering the cost of the technical documentation, which will also lower the cost of the final product.

Visual minimalism shares advantages with minimalism; with visual minimalism, the documentation is more understandable and takes less time to produce. The majority of respondents to our survey also said that implementing visual minimalism made documentation easier to maintain.

As our survey showed, using videos has some advantages that are compatible with minimalism such as illustrating the documentation to ensure that users understand it better. However, our respondents also pointed out downsides that clash with the advantages of minimalism.

While our respondents found videos useful to illustrate documentation, they also said that videos take too long to create and are hard -if not impossible- to maintain. The maintenance is particularly important in software-related documentation for instance, because the interface and processes are evolving with each update. The video format also makes finding specific information harder. Making and editing videos also raises the cost of technical documentation because video production requires equipment and software. The company may need to hire video editors and graphic designers or pay for training so that their employees can acquire these skills.

These downsides can be dampened by making minimalist videos, that is: making short videos, limiting the text elements to reduce the potential translation costs, and making sure to save the source files to make the maintenance of the video slightly easier.

The conflicting opinions towards videos

Another interesting element we found in the results of our survey is that, even though 60% of our respondents voted that videos are rather not important to their documentation, 50% of our respondents would recommend using videos to other technical communicators. Despite the many

disadvantages pointed out by our respondents, half of them would still recommend videos. This shows that videos can truly be beneficial to technical documentation if they are used for the right purpose.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how visual minimalism applied to videos and how technical communicators perceived videos. We wanted to know if making videos was compatible with minimalism in technical documentation. We also wished we had more answers to have more feedback from other professions, especially from e-learning experts, to better compare them with the feedback from the technical writers. Despite those potential limits, the data we have gathered enabled us to investigate our hypotheses and draw new ones.

The answers we received from our survey show how opinions on videos and visual minimalism diverge, partially due to the variety of the projects technical communicators can work on. While there are benefits to videos, they are deemed costly and long to make, which makes them incompatible with a minimalist approach to technical documentation. However, for certain fields such as e-learning, videos are frequently used and are sometimes even necessary. Minimalism can also be implemented in video production to diminish the downsides of this format.

Through time and development, work practices evolve. There may be a day when videos will replace written documentation, we already have the case with illustrations that replace text instructions in some cases. However, the use of videos raises questions, especially when taking into consideration the current habits in video format. Nowadays, very short videos are popular for entertainment, people who grew up with this video format tend to be less patient to find the answer they are looking for. This could, in the future, influence technical writers to find other means to communicate technical information.

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About the authors

We are three students from Paris Cité University (Université Paris Cité) who wrote this research article at the end of our master's degree in multilingual technical communication (Master CTM - Communication Technique Multilingue). We were inspired by our experiences during our apprenticeship to write this article.

Appendix 1: Comments from the respondents

Respondent #1: “Ces réponses s'appliquent pour les vidéos de présentation, vidéos de démonstration et tutoriels”

Respondent #2: “La vidéo dans le contexte documentaire est un vaste sujet : quel type de produit est documenté (hardware, software) ? quelle technique est utilisée (film, stop motion, capture, 3D, animation) ? En fonction, il y a plusieurs approches possibles pour être minimaliste et faire en sorte que la vidéo soit facile à maintenir. Dans notre équipe, nous avons automatisé en partie les vidéos de la doc logicielle, cependant il y a toujours une étape de vérification et de montage donc ce n'est pas instantané. Je dirais qu'un aspect important du minimalisme en vidéo est de faire les vidéos les plus courtes possibles.”

Respondent #3: “Il faudrait élargir le sujet des vidéos aux gif animés, plus concis et moins coûteux.”

Respondent #4: “le minimalisme aurait dû être défini plus précisément en introduction du sondage. Ce que vous expliquez est... le B. A BA de la rédaction technique”

Respondent #5: “Les vidéos sont un format de documentation à part entière. Elles répondent à des problématiques précises qui sont impossibles à adresser par écrit. Par exemple, pour faire une démonstration d'un logiciel pour des clients, ou pour illustrer des manipulations sur du hardware quand elles sont trop complexes à écrire (une vidéo vaut parfois un long discours).

En ce qui concerne les images, dans la documentation de logiciel, j'en utilise aussi peu que possible, car la moindre modification de l'interface (ce qui est très fréquent) entraîne plusieurs jours de travail fastidieux. Par contre, pour du hardware (j'ai travaillé sur des procédures de réparation de robots), une photo par étape était indispensable pour montrer précisément les actions à faire, et les mises à jour des pièces sont rares et n'entraînent pas une mise à jour de toutes les images, donc le temps passé sur les mises à jour de la documentation sont raisonnables.”

Respondent #6: “Bien doser l'équilibre vidéo/texte, ils sont complémentaires.”

Respondent #7: "I would like to better explain my response to the second to last question. I think I would advise using videos depending on what type of content you are documenting and your audience. I do not believe in documenting everything using videos. As a matter of fact, I believe videos should be short (no more than 15 minutes maximum) because the user might get bored and they should be straight to the point (no 5 minute-intros and outros)."