Product Selection Guide: FrameMaker (2015 Release) & InDesign

How to determine which product best matches different projects or work flows

Finding the right product to match your production needs

FrameMaker (2015 Release) and InDesign are both fine products, and each one has its own set of strengths and advantages. Even though features from both products do overlap in some areas, it is important to remember that these two products were developed with the needs of very different types of users in mind. As a result of this, both FrameMaker and InDesign evolved in different directions over time:

(a) InDesign continues to dominate the creative space, while

(b) FrameMaker consistently dominates the technical communication content space, including XML and DITA authoring.
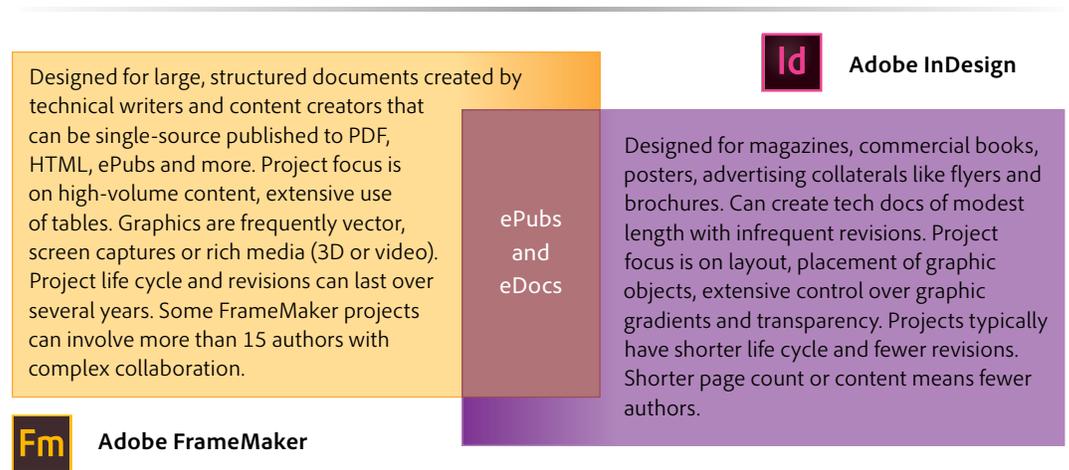
Each product has strengthened and grown more sophisticated to meet swiftly changing customer needs. The proliferation of mobile devices and tablets have led to product suites and features that enable either InDesign or FrameMaker to publish beyond paper and PDF to a variety of screens. Even in this area, the emphasis on the type of content published is markedly different. InDesign has many showcase accounts like Vanity Fair, in which glossy magazines or publications have been reinvented for the iPad. On the other hand, FrameMaker has the ability to publish life-saving technical instructions to either richly dynamic PDF, responsive HTML or HTML5 for tablets. FrameMaker is frequently used by members of the aerospace community who must republish and revise thousands of "pages" of rigidly regulated maintenance and instruction manuals.

The simple diagram below visually illustrates where the two products may overlap:

Adobe InDesign

Designed for large, structured documents created by technical writers and content creators that can be single-source published to PDF, HTML, ePubs and more. Project focus is on high-volume content, extensive use of tables. Graphics are frequently vector, screen captures or rich media (3D or video). Project life cycle and revisions can last over several years. Some FrameMaker projects can involve more than 15 authors with complex collaboration.

ePubs and eDocs

Designed for magazines, commercial books, posters, advertising collaterals like flyers and brochures. Can create tech docs of modest length with infrequent revisions. Project focus is on layout, placement of graphic objects, extensive control over graphic gradients and transparency. Projects typically have shorter life cycle and fewer revisions. Shorter page count or content means fewer authors.

Adobe FrameMaker

FrameMaker: born to be big

FrameMaker was initially developed as a text and content-oriented solution for high-volume, technical documentation with complex document components. Within 18 months of its invention, FrameMaker could create and swiftly open single documents that were over 1,000 pages long. Early versions of FrameMaker had fairly limited page layout capabilities, but the goal for most customers was to "churn out" massive amounts of documentation.

Early releases of FrameMaker had no color support, as 95% of documents were black-and-white only 20 years ago. The earliest, targeted users of FrameMaker were tech writers who authored, assembled and presented all of the content. Later versions of FrameMaker did add sophisticated color and page layout controls.
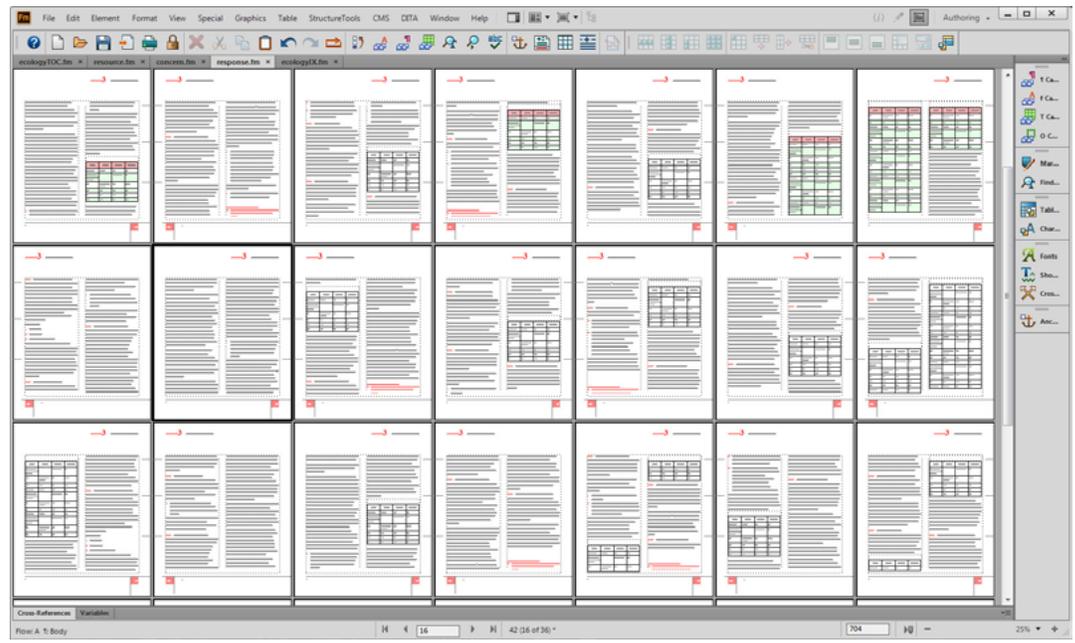
Long, complex FrameMaker documents have unbreakable numbered paragraphs, no-fuss tables that span many pages, and stunning speed for opening files, etc.

Automated tasks—Another hallmark of early FrameMaker development was the product's ability to automate complex tasks. More than 20 years ago, FrameMaker had strong book building capabilities, with automatically generated complex tables of contents, indices and other generated lists. At that same time, it was already possible to swiftly create or replicate complex table styles, footnotes (even in tables), multi-level indexing, cross-references that inserted all of the text for you, and highly complex running page headers and footers. These last three features would be a challenge, even today, with InDesign.

Single-source publishing—FrameMaker had early support for conditional text, which could show and hide some content, creating different versions of a document or manual from one set of source files. For instance, early versions of FrameMaker used conditional text control to create a UNIX and Windows version of FrameMaker documentation. Early versions of FrameMaker also supported "save as HTML" as well as "save as hyperlinked PDF".

Automatic hyperlinks—Very early versions of FrameMaker automatically placed a hyperlink in generated Tables of Contents, List of Figures, List of Tables, Indices and between cross-references (xrefs) and target text. These hyperlinks could be used for cross-document navigation during authoring, and were automatically placed within generated HTML files.

XML and Structure—About 15 years ago a version of FrameMaker was developed to handle SGML. This evolved into the current product, which has an intuitive approach to handling DITA, XML and other structured applications. This has become a solid growth area for FrameMaker, and over half of the user base authors content in DITA or XML on a regular basis. Since topic-based authoring is a natural fit for FrameMaker, it is a popular authoring tool companion for CMS (Content Management System), environments with high volumes of content.

It is not uncommon for tech comm groups to use FrameMaker to create documents or projects in XML "chunks" that are managed and assembled via CMS. Although formatting can be quite glossy in FrameMaker, structured, XML documents usually have a very "spartan" appearance compared to more graphically rich InDesign documents.

Over time, FrameMaker has evolved into a "best of breed" XML authoring solution. This is particularly true of the current version, which includes a satellite product – FrameMaker XML Author (2015 Release), which is a software only capable of authoring and editing XML files.

InDesign: born to be beautiful

The earliest versions of InDesign were aimed at early competitors like Quark and other high-quality desktop publishing tools. InDesign was more commonly associated with glossy marketing material or advertising agency projects than high page count technical documentation.

Text content was often authored in Word and imported into InDesign. *The earliest targeted users of InDesign were graphic artists, and team members who assembled the layout and presentation of content authored by someone else.*

Emphasis on color and presentation—The earliest versions of InDesign had a great deal of control over color and setting up document output for pre-press color separation. Although early versions of InDesign had decent text editing capabilities, content was usually authored in Word and imported into InDesign. Gradients, transparency and other effects could be applied to graphic and text elements. Although InDesign had highly granular control over page-layout (and many tools not found in FrameMaker), pagination was initially more of a manual rather than an automatic operation. Since typical, early InDesign documents were short in length, it was not a problem for early users to manually connect text columns.

More tools aimed at graphic artists continue to emerge; it would be much easier to design and update drop initials in InDesign rather than in FrameMaker. InDesign did have many automated features, but most were associated with graphics or text wrap around, rather than hyperlinking cross-references and indices. The image to the right is typical of a graphically oriented project that may have been created with an earlier version of InDesign.

InDesign became hugely popular when bundled with other products several years ago in what has be known as Adobe Creative Suite. InDesign's tight integration with Illustrator and Photoshop made it a logical choice for projects that were heavily populated with photographs, complex diagrams or glossy visual elements. InDesign became a product of choice for certain types of catalogs where color, layout and visual appeal were key project elements.

Over time, InDesign developed moderately sophisticated tables, some book building capabilities and rudimentary indexing, tables of contents and cross-references. These features never achieved the strength of those found in FrameMaker due to lack of demand from the user base.

XML and Structure—In recent releases, InDesign introduced the ability to import a DTD and XML structure. The emphasis has been on importing XML elements into InDesign to create automatic layout. Although it is possible to extract XML from InDesign for transformation to HTML, InDesign is not a full-fledged XML or DITA authoring solution. Imported or exported XML with InDesign is "flat" in structure and does not preserve "validated" XML with strictly defined parent/child relationships between elements.

"Hard core" XML projects intended for technical publications typically have a modest amount of "fancy" formatting compared to typical InDesign projects.

General Product Capability Comparison

Document presentation

	FrameMaker	InDesign
Page layout	Decent set of layout tools, including master pages and ability to import page layout from other documents. Text can wrap around objects placed behind text frames, but text won't "split" and paginate across objects. Designed for automated pagination across 100s of pages.	Highly developed page layout tools, especially concerning text wrap around. Text may even wrap around tables. Product performance diminishes if documents achieve a high (e.g. >250) page count.
Paragraph and character styles	Styles may be created, imported and managed in catalogs. Some may consider the FrameMaker approach a bit more straightforward.	Excellent advanced user control over styles. InDesign projects are more prone to having exceptions or format overrides to achieve unique styles that do not need to reside in the catalog.
Sideheads	Paragraphs have three types of page positioning, (a) in column (b) sidehead (resume heads) and (c) run-in headlines on same baseline as following paragraphs. FrameMaker is still the only product in the market that can move paragraphs into the page margin based on style tags.	These effects can be achieved with different tools. Example, anchored boxed text can create what appears to be a sidehead.
Typographic control	Decent control over font, size, kerning, expand, condense, etc.	Most extensive range of control over typographic formatting on the market. Far superior to FrameMaker, but these features are not commonly used in tech doc.
Table styles	FrameMaker table catalogs store styles which may instantly change appearance of a table style, and also globally update the appearance of all table instances of that style. Alternating rows or columns with varying colors/shades or rule weights will automatically readjust themselves when rows/columns are deleted. Repeating table titles may have a "continuation" header variable and a "sheet count" variable in table footer rows.	Good, strong table styles are possible, with repeating header or footer rows. Unlike FrameMaker, table styles do not remember specific paragraph styles associated with table columns (e.g. numbered paragraphs in column 1). Continuation and sheet count variables not available (a feature only associated with tech doc).
Page headers/ footers	Up to 12 system variables can control automated content that appears in headers and footers. Catalogs may display first or last instance of a part number. Headers and footers may rotate and appear in side margins or on any portion of the page.	A decent set of tools for page headers and footers may pick up text from identified paragraph styles. InDesign does not have the granular level of control for displaying all or portions of paragraph numbered prefixes in page headers and footers. This is yet another feature only associated with tech doc.

Book building features

	FrameMaker	InDesign
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 are completely programmable with simple building blocks on a Reference Page. No real limit to number of levels to TOC.	Decent set of tools for generating TOC from specific paragraph elements. Limited control over inclusion of numbered paragraph prefixes, etc. Strong control over format and display of TOC elements, but not placement or order.
Index	Index entries may be sorted and displayed in virtually unlimited nested indents. Workspace pod displays 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. Thousands of index markers in InDesign can also cause performance problems in projects that stretch into 100s of pages.
List of Tables or Figures	Same controls can be used to create separate LOT (List of Tables) or LOF (List of Figures). As with TOC, placement of elements is completely open.	With effort, LOT or LOF may be created. Limited choices for ordering of elements (e.g. page numbers first). This feature is rarely used in InDesign projects.
Chapter exclusion	Ability to mark chapters or subsections of books to temporarily be excluded from PDF or print output.	N/A

Long document support

	FrameMaker	InDesign
Cross-references	Any paragraph or XML element may be a target of a cross-reference. Special pods display all xrefs in current or all open documents. Unresolved xrefs are highlighted.	Simple cross-references may be created to internal or external documents. Note: large projects with 100s of xrefs in InDesign may have serious performance issues.
Cross-reference format	Xref format made of simple building blocks which can compose an entire sentence automatically, e.g. "For more information, see Table 3.1 How to Get Started located on page 245 in Chapter 3, First Things First."	N/A
Fixing unresolved xrefs	Cross Reference pod will display unresolved cross-references with a red X and provide hints to missing target text.	N/A
Speed and performance	Opening and saving long documents does not reduce performance. A 1,100-page document will take only a few seconds longer to open than a 50-page document.	N/A
Performance during output to PDF or other formats	FrameMaker document page count has little effect on the time it takes to output to PDF, HTML or other formats.	Very high page count documents will affect performance in InDesign.
Footnotes	Complex footnote notation and styles are available in both paragraphs and tables	Decent footnotes are possible, although they are not a common part of many InDesign projects. No footnotes specific to tables are available.
Conditional tag expressions with nested parenthesis support	Show hide sections of text with conditional tags. Create complex expressions to show specific combinations of conditions to create custom versions of document with single- source publishing.	N/A

Long document support (continued)

	FrameMaker	InDesign
Regular expression support in search	Use PERL, eGrep and other regular expression search protocols to find specific items like date formats.	N/A
Single-click session restore for quick start	Ability to remember all open documents and page locations in a work session to restore your last location when starting next FrameMaker session.	N/A
Content review "on the go" with mobile devices	Save files for PDF review with Acrobat Reader on tablets. Import comments, deletions and annotations "in place" back into FrameMaker source files.	N/A

XML and Structured authoring

	FrameMaker	InDesign
Role-based XML authoring	FrameMaker is now a full-featured XML and DITA editor. Authors have three views: (a) XML View (b) Authoring (content) View and (c) WYSIWYG (preview) View. Full editing is possible in all three views. It is also easier now to hide menus and customize work spaces.	A simple structured tree view is available, as well as a view of XML code, but InDesign was neither designed for nor intended to be a full-blown DITA or XML editor. Most XML projects have formatting that would only use a fraction of the powerful tools available in InDesign.
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.	Ability to edit relatively simple XML files based on an imported DTD is available. This capability is designed primarily to map XML to fancy layouts and output to HTML for shorter projects like newsletters.
Full DITA 1.2 and XSLT 2.0 support	Virtually all DITA constructs are supported. EDD allows complex nesting of elements and automatic insertion of sibling elements.	N/A
Configure DITA editing for beginners	Banner text will now prompt users what type of content to insert. Substantially reduces training time.	N/A
XML view: code completing and error tracking	When authoring in XML view, author is prompted for legal elements. When element is entered, the "closing" value of element dropped in automatically.	N/A
Expandable DITA map topics for quick viewing of content	Switch from traditional "tree" view of DITA map to viewing actual full content of each DITA topic that you "expand".	N/A
Quick Element toolbar for easy, visual insertion of common DITA elements	Click on icon to create new topics, tables, figures, unordered or numbered lists.	N/A
Smart paste of unstructured content into DITA	Convert unstructured portions of Word docs, HTML, etc. into valid DITA by doing "smart paste" into appropriate location under element in structure view.	N/A

Automated Authoring and Formatting

	FrameMaker	**InDesign**
Scripting	Supports ExtendScript and custom plug-ins via FDK to automate tasks associated with high-volume production.	ExtendScript and various third-party tools to automate some tasks is available.
XSLT 2.0 support for transforms	XML can be transformed through custom use of XSLT.	N/A
Intelliprompt for elements and attributes	Authoring in XML mode will prompt user to choose correct element or attribute.	N/A

Publish to Tablets and Mobile without ancillary products

	FrameMaker	**InDesign**
Native multiscreen HTML5 output	Publish to HTML5 multiscreen w/o having to use Tech Comm Suite 5.	Use the Liquid Layout of InDesign to automatically adapt content when you create an alternate layout with different size or orientation in InDesign.
Generate native mobile apps	With an inexpensive Adobe PhoneGap license, you may instantly generate stand-alone phone or table mobile apps	Can be accomplished via Digital Publishing Suite (more expensive)
Native EPUB 3 output	Available	Requires Digital Publishing Suite
Native WebHelp output	Available	Requires Digital Publishing Suite
Native CHM output	Available	Requires Digital Publishing Suite
Native MOBI output	Available	With KindleGen and Kindle Preview
Native KF8 support	Available	With KindleGen and Kindle Preview

Role-based publishing

	FrameMaker	**InDesign**
Custom work spaces	Work spaces can be swiftly customized and "named" to match tasks for specific users and specific tasks. Training time can be substantially reduced on complex projects.	Work spaces can be customized.
Hide all or part of pull-down menus	Special config files may be used to make unwanted formatting or other pull-down menus unavailable. This is ideal with work flows in which you do not wish to have the publisher apply unapproved styles.	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
Authoring view	Content creators who need to be prompted for correct XML elements and have a generic preview during editing can now use Author View. Users can choose an "easy edit" version of Author View that displays common DITA topics and concepts as simple forms, prepopulated with mandatory text, and blank fields to fill in. No coding!	N/A

Summary

Both FrameMaker and InDesign have had to improve and expand their tools over several years to meet evolving customer needs. All types of content (marketing or tech comm) need to be published to tablet computers and mobile devices. Both FrameMaker and InDesign have solutions for this multi-platform publishing challenge.

Some potential customers may see a dynamic document with rich media in ePub format and conclude that it doesn't matter whether it was created with InDesign or FrameMaker. These authoring solutions are quite different because the volume of content determines which workflow processes need to be automated. InDesign projects tend to have a lower word or "page" count than FrameMaker projects. Hence, InDesign has more powerful tools in terms of complex layout, control over images, color and graphic elements.

The majority of FrameMaker projects either have a high word count with text as a dominant element, or the text content is frequently revised. FrameMaker projects are also more prone to single-source publishing to multiple versions for different consumers of highly technical content. As a result, tools like conditional text control, variables, cross-references and indices are more feature rich in FrameMaker than in InDesign, since they are used on a constant basis.

A transportation analogy—"Industrial strength" is a term that has frequently been associated with FrameMaker. "Luxury" might be a term associated with InDesign. If one were to choose vehicles to represent the two products, one might choose a luxury sedan for InDesign and a versatile, large sport utility vehicle (SUV) for FrameMaker.

Like a luxury sedan, comfort, prestige and presentation are often hallmarks of beautiful InDesign projects.

FrameMaker, on the other hand, is a "work horse" solution designed to haul many combinations of passengers or cargo. FrameMaker is also designed to transport larger volumes of cargo, over longer distances or on shorter trips repeated many times (e.g. multiple versions of documentation).

This final statement is a very general analogy, but it does give some idea of how different these two excellent products are. Just as you would have specific priorities in mind when choosing a vehicle, your project priorities will help determine whether you need the power tools provided by FrameMaker or the tight control over beautiful presentation that comes with InDesign.

Obviously, many companies will need both products for different departments who have different needs. FrameMaker and InDesign are not competitors; each product has a unique set of strengths aimed at a particular pool of users that complements one another. The fact that Adobe has the best-of-breed product for tech comm multi-channel publishing (FrameMaker) and the world's best-selling creative content authoring tool should assure customers that they can comfortably choose both products to encompass all of their needs.