Help center vs knowledge base: what's the difference?

Help center best practices

A knowledge base is a collection of articles. A help center is the website your customers visit when they need help, built around that collection, with search, navigation and a way to reach your team. People often use the two words interchangeably, and in HelpCenter.io they mean the same thing.

Here's the difference in more detail, and how internal and external knowledge bases compare.

What a knowledge base is

A knowledge base is an organized library of information: how-to articles, troubleshooting guides, FAQs, policies and reference material, grouped into categories so people can browse and search it.

The term describes the content and how it's organized, not who reads it. A knowledge base can serve your customers, your own team, or both.

What a help center is

A help center is where people go when they need help. At its heart is a knowledge base, and around it are the things that turn content into support:

- **Search,** often with AI answers written from your articles.

- **Navigation:** a home page, categories and related articles.
- **A way to contact your team,** such as a contact form.
- **Your branding,** usually on your own domain.
- **Extras** such as a help widget inside your product, announcements or a community forum.

In short, the knowledge base is what you know, and the help center is where customers go to find it.

Side by side

Compare	Knowledge base	Help center
What it is	An organized collection of articles	The website people visit for help
Made of	Articles, FAQs and categories	A knowledge base, plus search, contact options and more
The question it answers	"What do we know?"	"Where do I go for help?"

Readers	Customers, your team, or both	Mostly customers
Access	Public or private	Usually public, sometimes behind a login
Example	All your articles about billing	help.yourcompany.com, with a search bar, categories and a contact form

Internal vs external knowledge bases

The biggest difference between knowledge bases is who they're written for.

Compare	External	Internal
Readers	Customers, prospects and partners	Your employees
Typical content	How-tos, troubleshooting, FAQs, policies	Processes, support playbooks, HR policies, onboarding guides
Access	Public, or behind your customers' login	Private, with sign-in

Writing style	Plain words, no internal jargon	Can use internal terms and project names
Found by search engines	Yes, when public	No

Many companies run both, and it's usually best to keep them apart. Customers shouldn't stumble on internal procedures, and your team shouldn't have to dig through customer articles to find a process. When only a few internal articles sit next to customer content, a private section inside your help center can be enough. See Use a private help center as an internal knowledge base.

How they work with your support team

A knowledge base, a help center and your support inbox each do one part of the job. Here's how a question moves through them:

1. A customer gets stuck and opens your help center, or the help widget inside your product.
2. They search, and the help center finds the right article in your knowledge base.
3. If the article doesn't solve it, they contact your team from the help center.
4. Your team answers, and links to an article where one exists.
5. When the same new question keeps arriving, someone writes an article for it, and the knowledge base grows.

The last step is what keeps the whole thing useful. Without it, the knowledge base stops matching what customers ask.

Other terms you'll hear

- **FAQ page:** one page of short questions and answers. Handy for a handful of questions, and often one part of a help center.
- **Documentation, or docs:** detailed reference material, often for developers, such as API guides.
- **Self-service portal:** another name for a help center, sometimes with account features such as ticket status.
- **Wiki:** a knowledge base that anyone on the team can edit. Usually internal and loosely structured.
- **Help desk:** usually the software your support team uses to answer tickets, not the articles customers read.

Which one do you need?

Three questions settle it:

1. **Who reads it?** If customers do, you need a help center, and its knowledge base is where you'll spend most of your time. If only your team does, you need an internal knowledge base.
2. **Does it need a sign-in?** Public content helps new customers and search engines find you. Content for paying customers or employees needs access control.
3. **Should search engines and AI assistants find it?** If yes, make it public and write it for people who don't know your product yet.

How HelpCenter.io helps

In HelpCenter.io, "help center" and "knowledge base" mean the same thing. Each help center holds your knowledge base (articles, FAQs and categories) and publishes it as a website on your subdomain or your own domain, and inside the widget on your website or app. Make it public for customers, or private for your team, and keep team-only sections in private categories. See Control who can see your help center and Make a category private.

Related articles

- What is a help center?
- Use a private help center as an internal knowledge base
- Control who can see your help center