

Manual Writing Made Easier

You *can* make your manuals easy to use and read. Just know your audience, define jargon, use a personal approach, organize well, and write clearly.

By DONNA J. REDDOUT

Technical training documentation in the late 1980s emphasizes a task-oriented, user-friendly manual format. After all, as manual writing expert Edmond Weiss points out, "...users don't want to know how the system works; they want to know how to work the system." But, before you can have a good manual, your writing must be clear, concise, and comprehensible. Use the following five writing tips to improve the usability of your manuals.

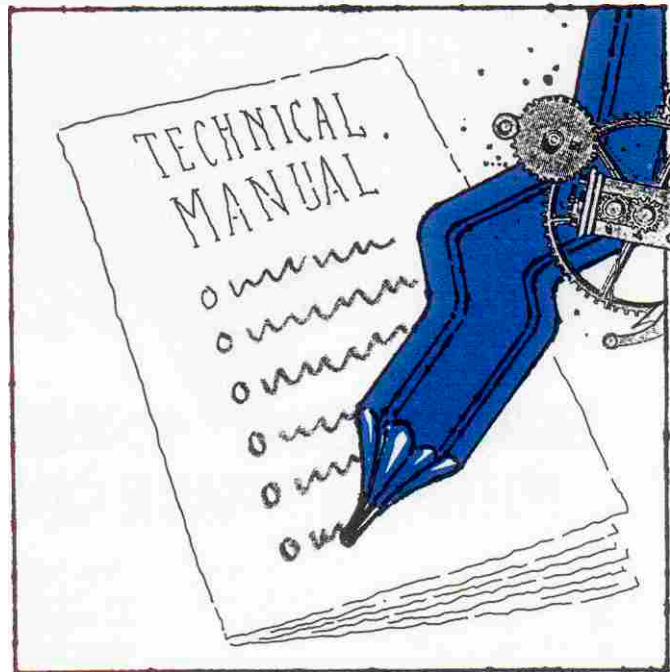
Know your audience

The more you know about your audience before you begin writing, the better your readers will understand what you write. Your audience determines style, use of technical jargon, content and structure, and the reading grade level.

Find out who will use your manual. List specific names, if you can, or specific groups of people. Then find out how much they know about the subject. Survey all or a representative sample of your audience to discover the extent of their knowledge. The ratio of novices to experts determines the type and amount of information you put into your manual and how that information is organized.

Identify and define language

Every discipline has specialized words, phrases, and acronyms that experts in that discipline use when they communicate



with each other. This language—or *jargon*—often accurately communicates ideas and concepts within a discipline but is often unfamiliar to those outside the discipline. Law and medicine are two common examples.

The manual's user does not need to know a discipline's complete vocabulary—only those terms necessary to perform the tasks. List the jargon your subject uses, then decide which terms you *must* use and which terms may be substituted for a more common word. Acronyms create special problems since technical fields tend to use them extensively.

Clarity is the most important goal of manual writing; therefore, identifying un-

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familiar terms and defining them is crucial. Here are some other suggestions:

- If a term is subject-specific and you must use it, assume the novice is unfamiliar with it and define it.
- If the user will see the term used during the performance of the task, then define it.
- Include a glossary of words, phrases, and acronyms in your manual and design the glossary to make reference quick and easy. Be sure the glossary is complete and accurate.

When you define terms remember the following suggestions:

- Use plain English. Don't use jargon to define jargon.
- Identify how the term is *like* something familiar, and then describe what makes it *different*.
- Write the definition objectively. Identify what it is, not what you think of it.

Select a personal point of view

The best point of view to use is the personal point of view. The personal approach, which uses the pronoun *you*, emphasizes the reader. Using *you* in a manual has four advantages: you establish a rapport with your audience; the reader becomes personally involved; you will not be "talking down" to a novice; and you can express technical ideas and concepts more clearly than if you were using the impersonal point of view.

A note about humor: Some sources suggest using humor to make the novice user feel more at ease and to relieve anxiety, but use humor sparingly. Humor may be appealing at first, but it rapidly becomes irritating and even gets in the way of your message. Most users prefer concise, to-the-point instructions. They don't like wading through paragraphs that are entertaining when their purpose is to learn a process.

Organize for clarity

How you organize your manual determines not only its usefulness but also the user's attitude toward the document, the equipment, and the job. Nothing is more frustrating than having a task to perform and not being able to find the procedure in the manual. Consider both content and structure when organizing your document.

The content should emphasize critical tasks. These tasks are difficult to perform, and errors cause serious consequences. Do not overemphasize low-risk errors. The content should make a distinction between necessary information and nice-

to-know information. The content should also give your readers realistic explanations of what to expect. (What *really* happens if I push this button?)

The structure is almost as important as the content. Structure the document so it can be used quickly and easily. Avoid jumps, skips, and loops that keep the user flipping pages. Organize the manual from simple to complex, by order of performance, or in any other order that suits your objective, audience, and subject.

Minimize the amount of conceptual information; i.e., how the machine works or descriptions of its components. If you include it at all, keep conceptual information short, simple, and easy to read.

Design a detailed table of contents as a ready reference for the user, and highlight the more frequently used or most critical tasks. Also consider having an index that keys on words, phrases, acronyms, and procedures. Anticipate your user's needs. What information might the user have to

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- "I'll give you one day."
- "I want synergy, not sociability."
- "Let's focus on real-world issues."
- "Can we teach it in the field?"
- "Find something for sales teams."
- "Does it focus on cost-control?"
- "How about train-the-trainer?"
- "How about our top-level teams?"
- "Can we customize the program?"
- "Is scheduling flexible?"
- "Our meetings are free-for-alls."
- "What about our task forces?"
- "Can you teach collaboration?"
- "How about cycling goals downward?"
- "Our teams are inefficient."
- "How about teamwide goals?"
- "Will low-level teams catch on?"
- "We need action-planning."
- "Senior management needs help."
- "No one tells it like it is."
- "What's a mission statement?"
- "There's bad blood between teams."

Figure 1—Verbs

USE:	INSTEAD OF:
Recognize	Be cognizant of
Try	Make an attempt to
Gather	Accumulate
Begin	Commence
Show	Demonstrate

look up in a hurry? Consider having an outline at the beginning of each chapter.

Write clear, factual prose

After you have written your first draft, concentrate on editing. When you edit, check verbs, word usage, and sentence structure.

If you use weak verbs, your writing will be weak. Use forceful, descriptive verbs. Minimize the use of the verb *to be*, and avoid sentences that begin with *there is* or

there are. Use one-word and short verbs. Figure 1 gives some examples of good and bad verb forms. Search for verbs that precisely describe actions the user must perform: attach, center, crimp, disconnect, isolate, list, mix, press.

Avoid passive verbs. Passive verbs cannot express the authority or urgency necessary to explain step-by-step procedures. They do not clearly identify what the subject is doing. However, passive verbs *may* be used if the doer of the action is unknown or unimportant. For example, "The software was designed in 1983."

Substitute concrete and specific words for abstract and general words, common words for formal words, and single words for phrases. Figure 2 gives some examples.

Delete buzzwords—words that are currently popular. These words often lack precise meaning, and they usually fade out of use in a short time. Figure 3 shows examples of these.

Distinguish between suggestions, recommendations, and requirements. Match the helping verb to the level of action required. When you suggest an action, use low-force helping verbs, like *should* or *ought to*. When you recommend an action, use moderate-force helping verbs, like *must* or *have to*. When you require an action, use the most forceful helping verb, *shall*. Do this consistently and your reader will recognize the appropriate level of action. Using *shall* when you merely suggest an action confuses your reader.

As a general rule, keep sentence length short. Ideas and concepts are easier to grasp in short sentences. The length of the sentence and the number of syllables determine the reading difficulty or reading grade level (RGL). To have an RGL of 7 or 8, you must average 11 to 15 words per sentence and 1.5 syllables per word.

Put the main idea (subject and verb) first in the sentence: "Turn the lever clockwise until it stops." However, if a condition determines the action, state the condition first. For example, "If the green light goes off, press the panic button," not "Press the panic button if the green light goes off." Arrange the steps of a procedure in the order in which the user must consider them.

The finished product

According to Yale writing professor William Zinsser, well-done technical writing is "...the principle of leading a reader who knows nothing, step by step, to a grasp of the subject." If you use the writing tips discussed in this article, you will have a manual that the user will be glad to use.

Figure 2—Word usage

USE:	INSTEAD OF:
Concrete/specific words	Abstract/general words
Typewriter	Office equipment
Truck	Vehicle
Six	Several
Pencil	Writing system
Common words	Formal words
Use	Utilize
Help	Facilitate
Best	Optimum
Rest	Remainder
Skills	Competencies
Single words	Phrases
Calculate	Perform a calculation
If	Should it prove to be the case
May	Have permission
Except	With the possible exception of
Because	For the reason that
Until	Until such time as
For	For the purpose of

Figure 3—Buzzwords

Thrust (of your report)	Reconfigure
Impact	Target
Parameter	Access
Time frame	Ongoing
Input	Downsize
Viable	Optimize
Overview	Prioritize
Quantify	Synergistic
Throughput	