

User documentation is all too often written by programmers for programmers. It tends to focus on the product's features, rather than the user's tasks. Generally, programmers aren't in the ideal position to be writing user documentation. They're too close to the bits and bytes, and they're too far from the user. To them, what the product can do tends to be far more important than what the user can do with the product.

It's a subtle – but vital – distinction. Research shows that the key to effective user documentation is writing task oriented help. Even better, write your help according to the minimalist theory. In the documentation world, “minimalism” is a fancy word for a commonsense practice. In basic terms, it means write to your reader and keep it simple.

The theory itself has a lot of twists and turns. If you want to read a great – but slightly wordy – book on the subject, check out the book “Minimalism Beyond the Nurnberg Funnel”, 1998, edited by John Carroll.

In the meantime, if you can tick every item in the following checklist, you'll be well on your way to usable online help that both your readers and your managers will thank you for.

Helpful Help Checklist

1. Base the help on real tasks (or realistic examples)
2. Structure the help based on task sequence – Chapter headings should be goals and topics should be tasks
3. Respect the reader's activity – this is generally more about what you don't do than what you do. Don't waste the reader's time by diving off into tangents
4. Exploit prior knowledge and experience – Draw the reader's attention to previous tasks, experiences, successes, and failures
5. Prevent mistakes – "Ensure you do x before doing y"
6. Detect and identify mistakes – "If this fails, you may have entered the path incorrectly"
7. Fix mistakes – "Re-enter the path"
8. Provide error info at end of tasks where necessary (rule of thumb, one error info note per three tasks is a good average)
9. Don't break up instructions with notes, cautions, warnings, and exceptional cases – Put these things at the end of the instruction, wherever possible
10. Be brief, don't spell everything out, especially things that can be taken for granted

11. Omit conceptual and note information where possible, or link to it. Perhaps provide expansion information at the end of the topic, plus maybe a note that there are other ways to perform the task/goal, but this is the easiest
12. Sections should look short and read short
13. Provide closure for sections (e.g., back to original screen/goal)
14. Provide an immediate opportunity to act and encourage exploration and innovation (use active invitations to act, such as, "See for yourself..." or "Try this..." rather than passive invitations such as, "You can...")
15. Get users started quickly
16. Allow for reading in any order – make each section modular, especially goals, but perhaps tasks (definitely if they can be performed in different order)
17. Highlight things that are not typical
18. Use active voice rather than passive voice
19. Try to account for the user's environment in your writing
20. Before writing anything, ask yourself “Will this help my reader?”

By building these practices into your documentation process, you'll find that your online help becomes easier to write, shorter, and far more usable for your reader. What's more, your boss will love you!

About The Author

Glenn Murray heads advertising copywriting studio Divine Write. He can be contacted on Sydney +612 4334 6222 or at glenn@divinewrite.com. Visit <http://www.divinewrite.com> for further details or more FREE articles.