
An Introduction to Technical Writing

Jan Kusiak, Training Services Manager
IRM Training Pty Ltd ACN 007 219 589
Suite 209, 620 St Kilda Rd, Melbourne, Vic. 3004, Australia
Tel: +613 9533 2300

Overview

At some time or another we all have to communicate using the written word, but all too often improving writing and communications skills are at the bottom of our “to do” list.

Yet how many times has poor communications led to incorrect decisions or even downright confusion? We’re not alone either – look at this extract from public documents issued by one of the world’s leading banks:

“Trade finance is designed to assist meet cash-flow shortages arising from a mismatch in the timing of making payments for goods or raw materials for use in manufacture of goods and the receipt of payments from the onselling of these purchased or manufactured goods”

You have to read this 2 or 3 times before the meaning becomes clear. Governments can be equally guilty – as you can see here in this example from some recent legislation:

“For the purpose of making a declaration...

a) treat a particular event that actually happened as not having happened; and

b) treat a particular event that did not actually happen as having happened...”

It looks like no organisation has a monopoly on poor writing skills and with the move to “online everything” we’re further tempted to cut corners as SMS, e-mail and online publishing become the mediums of choice.

Whilst we don’t advocate a return to “formal, grammar school English” we do need a balance, particularly when documents such as reports, manuals etc. spill over several printed (or online) pages. Traditional skills such as document structure, writing style, audience identification, grammar etc. are timeless – and essential if we want to connect with our readers.

In the following introductory chapter from IRM’s Technical Writing Skills workshop we look at what defines good writing and how to get started.

Introduction- Why don't we read manuals?

'If all else fails read the instruction manual' - Anon

So why don't we read manuals and instructions? Why do we often misread reports, e-mails, bulletins and other written communication?

We have all sometimes complained that 'they don't read the manual' or that the user only reads the instructions as a last resort. We may complain that managers don't read or understand business proposals, or that the forms and screens haven't been correctly completed. On the other hand we are probably aware that managers frequently complain about technical staff writing in jargon, and in too much detail. These issues point to the documentation - it is often ineffective.

One common failing with documentation is that the needed information is hard to find. The key to writing successfully is to provide fast, clear and easy access to information.

Note: Procedure manuals and software application manuals are among the most complex and difficult documents to produce. There are many other types of documents (printed and on-line) and we'll be looking at these as well, but we'll often focus on manuals as these embody most of the issues.

What are we writing?

Whatever we are writing, it is written to communicate something. We should do this with the maximum of clarity and the minimum of words. It is our responsibility to be clear – it is not the reader's responsibility to understand. To do otherwise is a waste of writing effort – and will cause needless cost and confusion with the readers.

Bad writing may lose us credibility and lose business. Poorly designed forms and documents may waste time and money. The Victorian government saved \$400,000 a year just by rewriting a cumbersome legal document – this saved staff time answering queries and processing incorrectly completed forms. How many sales proposals lost the business because of spelling errors?

What is good writing?

What does the following legislation mean?

'For the purpose of making a declaration under this Subdivision, we may:

- a) treat a particular event that actually happened as not having happened; and*
- b) treat a particular event that did not actually happen as having happened and, if appropriate, treat the event as:
 - i) having happened at a particular time; and*
 - ii) having involved particular action by a particular entity; and**
- c) treat a particular event that actually happened as:*

*i) having happened at a time different from the time it actually happened; or
ii) having involved particular action by a particular entity (whether or not the event actually involved any action by that entity).'*

How about this:

'The two modifications to the non-dependant's deduction provisions set out in para 5.29 of HB (82)2 which apply to certified cases are extended to standard cases. No non-dependant deduction shall...'

Both are gobbledegook, not plain English. There is no justification for this sort of language in *any* document, legal or otherwise.

We need to make our meaning clear. We must also ensure that it looks attractive – that means good layout and design, otherwise our intended reader may not even open the document.

We must write to suit our audience – this means that the style, level, words and logic complexity must be appropriate. The finished product must achieve its purpose, whether this is to persuade, inform, or gather information.

We need to use:

- Plain English
- Clear meanings
- Good layout
- Good design
- Content suited to audience
- Content suited to purpose

Writing for the reader

As writers we need to be readers. We need to read what we have written and try to put ourselves in the position of our intended audience. That is, we need empathy. So we must read what we've written from the point of view of someone who doesn't know what we know, who only knows what the words mean to him or her.

It may help us to imagine that we're reading out loud to a particular person, a colleague or friend, someone famous perhaps, who is going to follow our instructions to the letter. So we must choose the style and tone that suits them, that won't offend them, that is easy to follow.

The benefits of good documentation

It's always worthwhile keeping our communications objectives clearly in focus. With manuals and instruction guides, good documentation:

- Increases users' confidence in the product
- Increases effectiveness of the product by facilitating correct use
- Increases the credibility of the supplier in the eyes of the customer/user
- Reduces support time - in answering user queries, or correcting errors caused by poor documentation
- Reduces frustration caused by ambiguity

All of these points support our objectives – the effective and efficient use of products or systems by their users.

When it comes to e-mails, reports or other forms of printed or online documents, identifying your objectives in advance gives you a subsequent framework for structuring and writing your document.

A note on e-mails - just because they're informal and quick, don't underestimate the importance of writing style when composing them. Often an e-mail is the only way information is distributed in an organisation so how you word a request for funding approval (or pass on information to a customer) can have a big impact. These topics we'll cover a bit later in the workshop.

Whose responsibility is it anyway?

When it comes to new systems, applications or processes, many are delivered without manuals. Users are expected to write their own. That is almost always unsatisfactory for the following reasons:

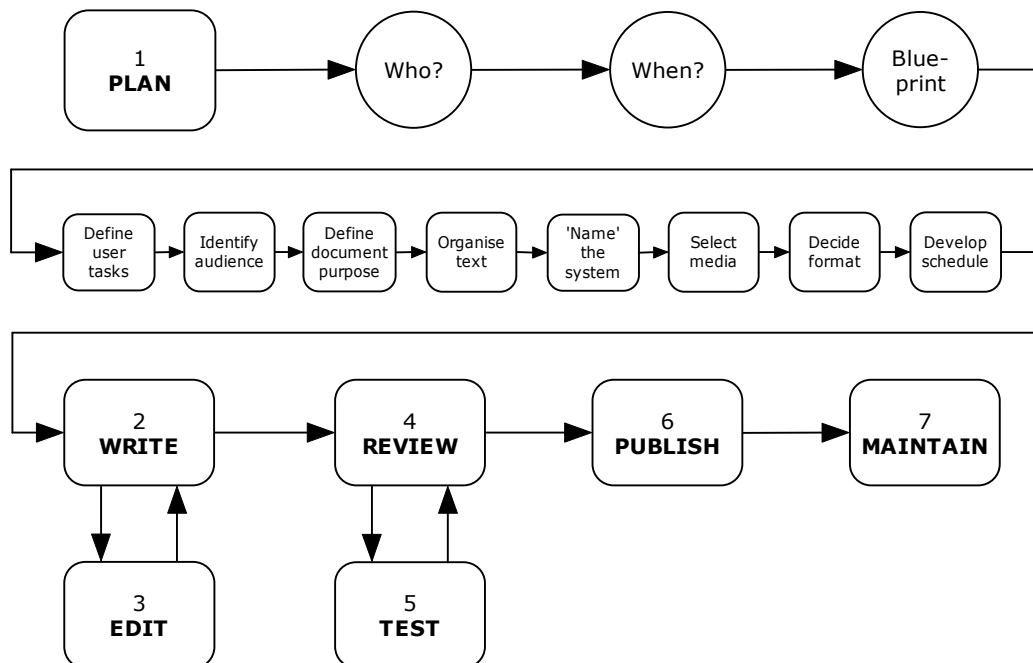
- Users understand their jobs but cannot be expected to understand the intricacies of new systems - especially if the systems have no manuals to explain them!
- It is unprofessional to hand-over a system to a user without proper documentation (unless the user specifically requested that).
- The system will not be properly used - the users will be left in confusion and justifiably lack confidence in the system.
- Systems support staff will have no idea what the system is used for.

On the other hand the systems development staff cannot be expected to have an intimate knowledge of the way the users do their work. Since writing an effective user manual requires an intimate knowledge of both the system and the users' work patterns, writing computer user documentation must be undertaken jointly by representatives of the users and the systems developers.

Getting started

Successful writing projects start with a plan. Once you've identified your objectives and audience, you need a structure and you need content.

The following template will help you produce the largest of manuals and a simplified version can be used for shorter documents:



A love of language

The majority of us are not poets but we can all appreciate a single line of concise well written text over a long rambling paragraph. If writing is a necessary part of your life then learn from others by being a reader as well – from newspapers and magazines to books and novels. You'll quickly develop a critical perspective on the writing style of others. If you're time poor then don't forget movie and television scripts as well as advertising copy. They were all written by someone who wants to communicate.

Writing is part science, part art. Taking pride in what you write and how you write will invariably make you a better writer.

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