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Was your last software specification *really* appreciated?

If you are still trying to write system specifications in English then you are in trouble. For the same reason that engineers and architects use graphical tools to specify their products so too must software specifiers (the term *software engineer* may be used, but it does imply that we're using a *disciplined* approach). A system needs to be broken into small pieces in a structured way and we need to show various views of the system and how they fit together. Typically we may show a process view, a data view, perhaps a time-line view.

Each piece, or module, can then be specified, using the following rules:

1. Structure the specification – use a numbering system. Number each separate business rule. User acceptance tests can then be devised and cross-referenced accordingly.
2. Cross-reference – your specification must cross-reference to the basic processes of your process model.
3. Your headings should include:
 - Overview
 - Input files
 - Output files
 - Files referenced
 - Processing rules
4. Write in the present tense, *not* the future. It's easier to write, easier to read, and it makes more sense as it will be read and used more *when the product exists*.
5. Write from the viewpoint of the processor, *not* the user.
6. Be crystal clear and unambiguous. Use the *active voice* (subject, verb, object, sequence), not *passive voice* (object, verb or verb phrase, subject, sequence).
7. Test the specification – *before* it gets to the developer!
8. The rules of clear writing apply. In addition, do not use words like: *should, could, may, can, might*, as these lead to ambiguity. Do not use *automatically* – a computer process by definition is an automatic process – that is what you are specifying.

For further information check the following training courses: '**Business Analysis**', '**Requirements Gathering & Specification**', '**Technical Writing Skills**'

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