



PROFESSIONAL SERVICES TECH NOTE #012

Writing Procedural Documentation

The Concept

Due to the complexity and constantly changing nature of our jobs, we frequently have to write tutorials, FAQs, standard procedures, and checklists to inform or teach users and co-workers. Learning to write effectively will ensure your documentation does not end up collecting dust in a binder on the shelf.

What It Means To You

There are two reasons we write documentation: to record a procedure so we do not have to memorize it or to teach someone how to perform an unfamiliar task. Because all documentation should teach, focus on writing for readability and comprehensibility. Keep sentences simple and be explicit. Not only list the steps but provide explanations and examples of expected results. The following is an example of a common style to be avoided:

1. Go here.
2. Click this button and check the box.
3. Type "this."
4. Press Enter.

This is known as 'writing for lemmings' because it provides no explanation and therefore does not teach. The goal of all procedural documentation is it should be foolproof to use at 3 AM or when users are demanding an immediate solution. Be sure to include expected results and time estimates. If the screen will normally be blank for 5 minutes then the reader needs to know after 10 minutes, something is wrong.

More Information

<http://www.icsharpcode.net/TechNotes/TechnicalWriting20020325.pdf>

http://www.knowledgehound.com/khhow2s/write_how_to.htm

<http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article3724.asp>

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