

Philip Tory's Tips for Technical Writers: “DO NOT ASSUME”

Here are some more writing tips for you.

When we start to write Operating Procedures, Work Instructions, User Manuals or Help Guides, we naturally begin with our own thoughts, our own knowledge about the subject matter. We may then ask for further information from other people, to improve our understanding of the equipment / software / maintenance procedure etc. This is good practice.

Then we start writing. We work hard at it – it may take a long time to finish it. We get it proof checked. Then we send it out to our customers or staff with the new software / products / updates, and so on.

But does this process go deep enough?

The mistake many writers make is that **they haven't asked the end users** what **they** want to know; how **they** want it presented. We **ASS|U|ME** we have the right approach ... but, as the saying goes,

“When you ASS|U|ME something, it makes an ASS of U and an ASS of ME.”

Not many companies take this very important step when doing their documentation: they don't ask for suggestions or feedback from their end readers.

THE READER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON.

Therefore, I recommend that you contact a few existing users where you have a good relationship. **Ask** them relevant questions about your documentation, aimed at obtaining helpful replies. **Create your own questions**, of course; but here are some that I have used in the past:

- How well did we write the content of our Instructions / Manual / User Guide?
- What did you like about it?
- What didn't you like?
- What could we do better in our next manual?
- Did we write too much about some parts, but not enough in others?
- Were there some parts that just weren't relevant or necessary?
- Was it clearly laid out? How could we improve it?
- Did we leave out important information?
- Did we explain things properly so that you could understand it easily?

Technical Writing Tips from Philip Tory, Professional Technical Writer

- Did you have to read anything more than once, before you understood it?
- Did we make any mistakes?
- Was it in the correct sequence, so that there was a flow to the information? Or was it a bit disconnected – something here, something there, not really holding together very well?
- What do you need in our next Manual? What particular structure would be helpful to you?

Feel free to use some of these questions, or make up your own – but do ask them!

Remember, **THE READER IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PERSON**. Your end users have to read your information and then go and do the task. You want them to do it quickly, easily, and without mistakes – and they want the same.

Some mistakes can be merely time-wasters, while others can be catastrophic.

Well-written documentation can save a lot of time for the user; and time is money; so we all need to write our documentation well.

Therefore, if you're writing the next round of documentation, consider asking some of your end users **before you start**. If they're going to use the product, make it run properly, and perhaps maintain it afterwards, what do **they** need to know?

Don't guess: ask them!

It's in their interests that you improve your documentation, and in your own company's interest that you make a truly professional job of it. In some companies, this has reduced incoming Support Calls by a third, so it's worth thinking about. It can also help to win substantial sales because your reputation improves.

I recently did some documentation for a cardiac research project for The University of Oxford. Right at the beginning, I asked them to consult their End Users, to find out how they wanted the information presented. So the university asked a number of significant end-user organisations what information they needed, and these users gave us some excellent feedback. Consequently, I wrote the User Manual based on what they needed. It covered all that they needed to know, and in the correct order. So, of course, they were delighted!

Enjoy your writing!

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