

How to write a How-To

0.3

This How-To describes the steps necessary to write a How-To document. Writing documentation is a valuable way to give back to the community.

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1. Intended Audience

Users who are ready to share their knowledge and experiences with the community.

2. Purpose

These guidelines are based on successful how-to document structures used by other open source projects with diverse author groups. Following these tried and true guidelines will help to ensure the effectiveness of your work.

3. Prerequisites

How-To authors should have:

- A unique How-To topic, related to using Forrest, which fulfills a specific need. Look at existing How-Tos to find a niche for your work. Consider posting your idea for the How-To to user mailing list, to make sure another author's draft is not already in process.
- A sufficient ability in English to write the document. However, we would rather that you just make a start, as the community can help to fine-tune the document.
- Copy this template document "howto-howto.xml" to be modified with your own content as necessary.
- An understanding of the How-To document structure. Just use this template document and you will be safe. Make sure you run 'forrest validate-xdocs' before contributing your document.

Note:

See the DTD documentation which explains the document structure.

4. Steps

Here is how to proceed.

4.1. Write the Overview

An overview helps potential readers to determine quickly if a particular How-To matches their interests or needs. In a few sentences, summarize the main points of your How-To. Make sure to include any critical definitions which will help readers evaluate the utility of your How-To. Consider writing the overview last, after you have completed all other sections.

4.2. Describe your Intended Audience

If your How-To is targetted at a specific audience, describe it here. For example, potential readers will have different levels of skill using Forrest. They will also bring different areas of expertise and backgrounds to their How-To learning experience. When you clarify your target audience up front, you will save all other readers time and confusion.

4.3. State the Purpose

State the purpose of your How-To. Explain how the reader will benefit by reading it. Give your reader an incentive or two to continue.

4.4. List any Prerequisites

Inform your reader about any required knowledge, configuration, or resources they may need before stepping through your How-To. Assist them in this preparation by linking to other useful resources on the Forrest site or the web. Helping your readers to prepare increases the likelihood that they will continue reading your How-To.

4.5. Describe the Steps of your How-To

In a precise, step-by-step approach, walk your reader through the process. Make sure your reader can reproduce your intended result by following your exact steps. Make the learning process efficient by supplying sample code snippets or configuration details as necessary.

4.6. Extend the Learning

Provide your reader with a few real-world examples of how the techniques or capabilities gained from your How-To could be applied. Reward the reader for successfully completing the How-To with a few ideas about how it will pay off.

4.7. Summarize the Entire Process

In a few sentences, remind the reader what they have just learned. This helps to reinforce the main points of your How-To.

4.8. Additional Tips or FAQs

In some cases, step-by-step instructions simply aren't enough. Use this section to pass on any other tips or frequently asked questions. Anticipating the needs of your readers will increase the overall success of your writing effort.

4.9. References

Remember to acknowledge any third-party resources or individuals who contributed to the development of your How-To. Consider providing links for those motivated readers who want to learn more.

4.10. Submit via the project issue tracker

Create an attachment for your How-To document, and submit it via the project issue tracker.

4.11. Get some feedback

When the committers have added your document then it will be available for everyone to build upon and enhance. Feedback will happen via the mailing lists.

5. Extension

Solutions can be extended to cover many different problem domains. A nearly unlimited number of potential How-To topics, from simple to complex, are available right now, limited only by your imagination.

6. Frequently Asked Questions

6.1. 1 General issues

6.1.1. 1.1 What is the difference between a How-To and a tutorial?

The goal of a How-To is to help the reader to accomplish a specific task with clear and concise instructions. While tutorials may contain How-To-like instructions and content, they also include additional background and conceptual content to help teach their readers higher order concepts along the way. How-Tos are concerned about filling an immediate, short-term need. Tutorials often provide long-term knowledge which can be applied across a range of needs.

6.2. 2 Style issues

6.2.1. 2.1 What spelling convention should I follow?

Use whatever spelling convention (American, British, etc.) that is most intuitive to you.

7. Tips

7.1. How-To dtd

The document structure is likely to change at some time. Please note that this HOWTO page is likely to change as well.

8. References

This is not the first, nor will it be the last, How-To on writing How-Tos. For other ideas and opinions on the matter, check out the following sources.

- Joel D. Canfield's How to Write a How-To on evolt.org.
- The Linux Documentation Project's HOWTO index page provides many excellent How-To documents to inspire your efforts.