Writing a Chapter

Writing a book takes a lot of planning and hard work, and a lot of people must work together to bring it into existence. Alongside the author, publishers, designers, commissioning editors, proofreaders, and editors are all key figures in a book’s development. Everyone needs to be on the same page, so it helps if everyone knows exactly what they’re working towards: here are some guidelines that will help you achieve that.

This chapter is intended to demonstrate how to write a great Packt chapter. It is specifically designed to look just like a real chapter from a Packt book. We will cover the following topics:

* Applying the Packt template
* Discovering Packt chapter structure
* Developing a high-quality chapter
* Responding to feedback

Technical requirements

This chapter requires you to have access to Microsoft Word and the Packt Blank Chapter with Template file.

The Packt template

The Packt template is how we ensure that all Packt books conform to the same standards of presentation. It’s like a set of rules which tells everyone – from the author, to the editor, to the people doing the final layout – exactly how the book should look when it’s finished. The template styles can seem flashy, but don’t worry, it will look a lot simpler when it’s printed!

To use the template, simply open the **Blank Chapter with Template** file, remove the text, and voila! You have a blank document with the styles attached, ready for you to start writing on.

Your editor will help you understand how to apply the styles. Once you know how to do it, it will become second nature, and everyone’s job is made easier in the later chapters.

Before we start looking at Packt style, let’s look at what not to do.

Avoiding mistakes

If you’ve used Word before, you will already be familiar with some of the native styles, including bold, italics, underline, bullet point lists, numbered lists, and so on. You can see the corresponding icons in the following screenshot.

A picture containing clock

Description automatically generated

Figure 1.1 – A screenshot showing some formatting options.

The Packt template should always be applied instead of the default options, which should not be used at all in a Packt chapter.

Now that we’ve got that out of the way, let’s look at how to use the template styles.

Getting familiar with the basic styles

The Packt template styles cover some of the same purposes as the automatic styles, but they look a bit different. Ultimately, all of these are supposed to be emphasizing something about the text, either for the design team or the reader.

All of the styles are listed in the Styles menu, as shown in the following screenshot.

A screenshot of a cell phone

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Figure 1.2 – A screenshot of the Styles menu.

Some of the more common styles include:

* P – Regular: The most common style of all! All body text in a Packt chapter should use the P – Regular style. Simply highlight a paragraph and select “P – Regular” from the Styles menu. Be aware that a Word document with the Packt template applied will automatically apply new text as “Normal”, not P – Regular. Make sure this is corrected.
* P – Keyword: It might look fancy, but P – Keyword is a very straightforward style. It is used to bold an important word or phrase when it is first introduced. Some examples might be the name of a particular application, or of a relevant mathematical concept. You may also use it for lists of terms: P – Keyword the term and then follow it with the explanation.
* P – Italics: Use P – Italics to add emphasis in a sentence, just as you would with regular italics. You will also need to use P – Italics when referencing other chapters in a book (like if we wanted to remind people that this will be covered in more detail in Chapter 2, Giving Editors a Raise) or the titles of other referenced works. You should also use P – Italics when mentioning an image in a sentence.

That covers the most common styles, but not all of them. Let’s see the rest, too.

Formatting lists

Lists can be tricky to format. Most lists will be covered by two different styles:

* L – Numbers: Use this style to present a set of instructional steps. Got some instructions that you want the reader to follow? L – Numbers is the way to go. You can also use it for any list where the items must go in a particular order.
* L – Bullets: Use this for all other forms of lists. If the contents of the list can go in any order, then use L – Bullets.
* For nested bullets (sub-bullets within bullet lists), use L2 – Bullets, and L3 – Bullets if you need them.
  + There is also L2 – Alphabets, L2 – Numbers, and L3 – Numbers, depending on your needs.

Any additional writing present in lists that does not need its own number or bullet – for instance, if the list has been interrupted by an image or code, or if it has simply run onto another paragraph – should use L – Regular. This style will make sure that the text stays aligned with other list text.

These are the most common text styles, but there’s another set of styles that you’ll definitely need to use in every chapter you write: headings.

Applying headings

Another crucial element of Packt’s templates is the application of headings. Each section and subsection of a chapter should have a heading that accurately describes what the reader will be doing or learning about in that section. We’ll cover this in more detail later on.

There are five heading styles:

* H1 – Chapter: This one is easy. Only apply the H1 – Chapter style to the chapter title at the top of page 1 of the document. It should not be used for any other headings.
* H1 – Section: Use this for the main topic headings. You should also use H1 – Section headings for the Technical Requirements and Summary sections.
* H2 – Heading: If a section can be divided into smaller sections – just as this section has been – use H2 headings to do that.
* H3 – Subheading: If an H2 section can be divided further into subsections, use H3.
* H4 – Subheading: If an H3 section can be divided even further, use H4. You probably won’t use many H4s, but they are an option!

If you find yourself wanting an H5 heading, you may be using too many subsections. Reassess the structure of the section and see if it can be altered.

You can see examples of each heading style in this chapter. But what other styles are there?

Various other styles

There are plenty of other styles to learn about, including:

* IMG – Caption: All images and tables need to be captioned with the IMG – Caption style. You can see examples of this throughout this chapter. It looks like this:

**IMG – Caption**

This style also needs to be applied to the image itself, to ensure it is correctly positioned on the page. The caption should always be “Figure” followed by the chapter number, then the figure number, then a brief description: Figure 1.1 is one example. Use P – Italics when referring to a figure in a sentence.

If the image has been taken from another source, provide attribution by adding “(Source: source URL)” in the caption.

* P – Callout and P – Callout Heading: You may have some information which needs to be drawn out and given its own little box. Title it with “Note” or “Important note” or “Tip” and apply P – Callout Heading, and then apply P – Callout to the box text.

**Tip**

This is what a tip box looks like.

* P – Bold: Use this when you are referencing onscreen text, such as particular menu or button options which may need to be clicked.
* P – URL: All Packt books will end up being printed, so we can’t use embedded hyperlinks – we haven’t yet figured out how to make them work on paper! Instead, if the reader needs to be directed to a specific website, paste in the full URL, and apply the P – URL style.

Tip

You can use the URL shortening service bit.ly to replace any long or complicated URLs.

* P – Quote: Try not to use too many quotations. When you really want to quote a significant chunk of text, apply P – Quote – and don’t forget to cite the source!

This is what a quotation looks like using P – Quote.

* SP – Editorial: This is a more specialist style, and it’s usually only used by editors. It’s used to indicate where something needs to be placed later. You might also use it as a placeholder for missing material, for example, if the software is currently awaiting an update and the chapter will need rewriting later on.

Here’s an example of the SP – Editorial style.

Packt books often involve demonstrating code to the reader. How should you display that?

Technical styles

These are the styles used to present code in a chapter:

* P – Code: This is to distinguish elements of code and operations from standard text when they appear within a paragraph. For example, you may refer to a for loop or an object.create() method in a paragraph and need a way to make sure the reader understands that it is code. This style is also used for the names of databases.
* P – Source: Use this for single lines of code, or command lines.

This is a command line in P – Source.

* SC – Source: For blocks of code that exceed one line in length, use SC – Source. Try to limit the size of your code blocks. We prefer not to have any code blocks that fill an entire page.

Code in SC -Source looks like this.

* L – Source: This is for code blocks that need to be aligned with a list.

L – Source code looks like this.

* SC – Highlight: Use this to emphasize material within a code block.

You can use SC – Highlight to draw attention to something in code.

Or apply it to a single line of L – Source to indicate a command line inside a list.

A command line in a list, using L – Source and SC – Highlight.

* SC – Link: Only use this when there is a URL embedded in an SC – Source code block.

Now that we’ve had a pretty thorough look at the style template, it’s time to look at how to structure our chapters.

Discovering Packt chapter structure

Packt books are sorted into different series. These series enable readers to identify whether or not a book about a specific technology is appropriate for their needs, depending on things like difficulty level or how much theoretical content the book contains. The different series are:

* Learn
* Mastering
* Hands-On
* Certification Guide
* Cookbook

The general chapter structure is similar in most of these. However, there is a clear difference when it comes to cookbooks. We’ll get to that in a bit; first, let’s look at how to structure a chapter in the other series types.

Structuring a standard Packt chapter

Let’s go through the structure of a non-Cookbook Packt book, section by section.

Chapter title

The obvious starting point is right at the top of page 1. We’ve actually already covered this in this document, in the Applying the Packt template section: the very first thing in a Packt chapter is the chapter title, with the H1 – Chapter style applied.

Introduction

You should use the introduction to introduce the main topics of the chapter, establish what the reader can expect to learn, why these topics matter, and how the material will be covered. This should be written in P – Regular style, as should most of the rest of the chapter. It shouldn’t exceed a full page, and generally doesn’t include any images, code, or callout boxes.

The introduction section has no heading and should also include an L – Bullets list of the main H1 section headings. This list does not include the Technical requirements or Summary sections.

Technical requirements

There can be confusion about the Technical Requirements section, but it is very straightforward. This is where you list all of the technical requirements for completing the chapter! If there is particular hardware that you recommend, or various applications, subscriptions, or memberships that are needed in order to follow along, this is where you should list them, under an H1 – Section heading. This is also a good place to link to the relevant GitHub repository.

Important note

GitHub is a service that enables coders to easily store and share their work with others, including text, code, and images. Every Packt book has its own GitHub repository, which will be created by the editor. It is the author’s responsibility to upload code to the repo. You can view the Packt GitHub page and learn more about GitHub here: https://github.com/PacktPublishing

If the chapter has no technical element – if there is no coding or instructions, nothing that needs the reader to use a computer – then you do not need a technical requirements section. Things like “Previous knowledge” or “a good understanding of mathematics” are not technical requirements.

With that out of the way, let’s move into the main part of the chapter.

Main body

The bulk of the chapter will consist of a few main sections, each with an H1 – Section heading. These headings should describe what the reader will be learning about (or learning to do) in that section. Usually, these headings should be phrased using a gerund verb form (that’s the kind with an “-ing”). Common words in headings include Exploring, Installing, Discovering, Configuring, and many more. You’ll see that each of the main sections in this chapter use a heading in this style, too.

Each section should, in clear terms, take the reader through a topic, improving their knowledge and skills. As the author, you are encouraged to use a variety of visual elements, including callout boxes, tables, charts and graphs, and images, to keep the chapter looking interesting.

Important note

All material that can be laid out as step-by-step instructions – for instance, explaining to the reader how to code a particular action – should be formatted as a numbered list using L – Numbers.

These main sections may be divided into smaller subsections, using H2, H3, or H4 headings. These are not arbitrary, however. They should also go in order: an H4 cannot follow an H2, an H3 must follow an H2, and so on. There should never be two consecutive headings, so don’t forget to include some lead-in text, even if it’s only a few simple words.

There should also never be two consecutive images, or consecutive uses of any non-text object. Every item should have its own lead-in text.

Important note

If the code being demonstrated generates an image or graph, then the code and the graph still need separate lead-in text.

One technique which can help keep chapters readable and flowing is to use signposting. This is when lines are included which guide the reader from one section to another, like a warm-up for the next section. Have a look through this chapter and see how many signposts you can find.

This is the section of the chapter where you’re likely to find the most varied template styles. Most of the text will be in P – Regular, but there will probably also be L – Bullets, L – Numbers, L – Regular, P – Code, SC – Source, P – Keyword, and so on.

There’s one more required section in a standard Packt chapter: the summary.

Summary

The final mandatory section of a Packt chapter is the Summary. This is a great opportunity for value reinforcement – that’s just a fancy way of saying “reminding the reader that there was a reason for everything they’ve just read.”

The very last part of a chapter is usually a paragraph briefly outlining the topic of the next chapter.

Further reading

You may wish to include a Further reading section. This is self-explanatory: it’s a section where the author can suggest some places where the reader can find more information on the topics discussed in the chapter, whether they are articles, books, or websites. These could be presented as an L – Bullets list, or paragraphs of P – Regular text.

Questions

Some authors like to end chapters with questions, usually multiple choice, to test the reader on what they have learned in the chapter. It’s up to you! If you choose to include this, you can use L – Bullets or L – Numbers to create a list of questions. L2 – Alphabets is a good option for multiple choice questions.

Earlier, we learned about the different Packt series types, and that one of these types was different from the others. Let’s take a look at Cookbooks.

Structuring a Packt Cookbook chapter

Cookbook chapters begin in the same way as other series types: H1 – Chapter heading, and then an introduction. In cookbooks, the bullet point list of topics isn’t a set of topics: it’s a set of recipes. Each recipe is one self-contained set of instructions to accomplish a specific task, and those recipes have a very specific structure.

There may or may not be a need for a Technical requirements section. You’ll see why in a moment.

Structuring recipes in a cookbook

Recipes follow a strict layout. They begin with the recipe title which, just like a main topic in a regular chapter, should use an “-ing” gerund form verb and the H1 – Section heading style, followed by an introduction to the aims of the recipe.

After the introduction, there are a set of specific headings which all recipes must follow:

* Getting ready: This is why you might not need to include a technical requirements section in a cookbook chapter. Each recipe has its own Getting ready section which will list any resources which will be required for the reader to complete the recipe. This may also include brief instructions for installations, and so on.
* How to do it…: This is the main section of the recipe. Kick proceedings off with a line of lead-in, then we need to go into a set of numbered, step-by-step instructions. Apply L – Numbers, and don’t forget to use L – Regular and L – Bullets when applicable. This section is required.

The How to do it… section is usually just for instructions. It should be as simple and as clear as possible with no discussion of the history of the software’s development, and probably not much discussion of how the code is working. That’s what the next section is for.

* How it works…: All of the explanation of what the code is doing and how it works belong here, in the aptly-named How it works… section.
* There’s more…: Here, you can include any additional material, such as development history (if the reader really, really needs it – otherwise, it’s best to steer clear), or any further steps or alternative methods which might interest the reader.
* See also: A section to include links to any further reading.

Remember, each recipe must follow this structure. There is no summary in cookbook chapters.

Now that we know what a chapter should look like, let’s think about how to actually write one!

Developing a high-quality chapter

Every writer has their own unique style and process, which will influence how and what they write. That said, there are some universal guiding principles when it comes to writing a Packt book.

Topic coverage

Before you started writing the actual book, you negotiated an outline with the Product Publishing Manager. Now that you’re in the preliminary draft stage, your Senior Editor and Content Development Editor will refer to that outline to assess whether or not you’re covering all of the material that was agreed.

Important note

Now that you’ve begun work on the book itself, your work will be read and evaluated by a Senior Editor (SE), who will eventually hand the book over to a Content Development Editor (CDE). These editors will be responsible for helping you to make the book as good as it can be!

Sometimes they might have notes that you disagree with, and that’s OK. Some things are non-negotiable (such as the templates and the structure), but when it comes to the actual content there is always room to have a conversation about whether or not specific parts could be improved.

Try to remember that it’s all part of the collaborative process of making a book together.

As you write, you may find that some topics work better if you discuss them from a different angle. You may decide that a different kind of software might be a better fit than the one you had planned to write about. That’s fine! The outline is not intended to be completely fixed. Just make sure you explain to the editor working on the chapter with you why you decided to make changes.

You may wish to include something which is not covered in the outline. When this happens, consider whether or not the new material is relevant to the agreed topic. If it is, and including it won’t make the chapter too long, that’s great. If the chapter is running significantly over the predicted page count, you may need to negotiate with your editor about whether or not to include it.

Important note

The predicted page count for each chapter is included in the chapter breakdowns in the book outline on EPIC. If the chapter is within 15% of the predicted page count, that’s not a problem; if it is much more than that it may require some serious cutting down. Page count impacts price.

If you think you’ve covered every topic that you need to, consider whether or not the topics have been discussed in suitable depth. Ask yourself these questions:

* Does it make sense?
* Is it clear?
* Are all of the terms explained?
* Might the reader have unanswered questions?

If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to consult your editor or the Project Manager and ask them for their opinion.

Language and readability

All of Packt’s books are written and published in American English. However, for many authors, English is not their first language. We know that there are lots of writers who have plenty of expertise but whose work just needs a little extra polish to ensure that the book can be a success.

In these cases, the editor may decide that the book would benefit from Language Support Editing (LSE). This is when a specialist comes in to help the writer with the language of their work. If this happens to you, please, do not be offended! It means that your work is good enough to justify your editorial team taking that extra step to bolster your chances of success.

Tip

Much of Packt’s proofreading is done by a company called Safis. Safis also do LSE work for Packt.

You should also think about the readability of your writing. What kind of tone are you using? Are you addressing the reader in a friendly, direct way? Are you employing devices like rhetorical questions; are you overusing them; are you varying your sentence length? Is it easy to read and understand, or is it a bit boring in places?

Humor is one tool which many authors like to use to keep their books engaging. That’s great! Be aware, however, that jokes can sometimes get “lost in translation” – something that is funny in one language might not be funny in another. Don’t be shy of asking for a second opinion on your jokes!

Most of a Packt book consists of written words, but that’s not all there is to it: we like to vary the content by including other visual elements, including images.

Using visual elements

There are several visual elements that you can use which need special attention, including:

* Images
* Tables
* Mathematical symbols and formulae

We’ll discuss each of these in this section.

Important note

All Packt books will be printed in grayscale. Color versions will be available as e-books, and readers will be able to download color image packs from the book’s GitHub repository. Please bear in mind when it comes to choosing images, or generating graphs and charts, that some of your readers may be looking at a black and white image when they read the book!

Using images

The use of images is encouraged in Packt books. However, not all images will add value to a chapter. Ideally, all images should provide something that the text does not. If you are giving detailed instructions and the accompanying images are simply screenshots of the process being described, then those images are probably unnecessary. You may find that chapters which go significantly over the predicted page count are using images unnecessarily.

Tip

The reader is unlikely to need screenshots to explain downloading, installing, or logging into an app.

If you have made an image yourself, check that any labels or other writing do not contain any spelling or grammatical errors that will have to be corrected.

Important note

All images are assessed for their quality by the graphics department once a chapter has been accepted, and they may see fit to make edits to some images. If you think that an image needs work, or needs to be replaced, you can ask the editor to submit a redraw request.

As we mentioned in the Applying the Packt template section, all images need to be captioned according to a very specific format. Try to give images a good lead-in, so their connection to the writing is clear to the reader.

Using tables

Tables are another useful way to display information.

Let’s look at an example. The following table recaps the differences and similarities between standard Packt chapters and cookbook chapters:

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Figure 1.4 – A table showing chapter sections.

All tables should be captioned using IMG – Caption in exactly the same way as images.

Using mathematical symbols and formulae

Mathematical symbols and formulae should be formatted using Word’s inbuilt Equation tool.

In addition to these items, there are some common problems will want to avoid.

Avoiding pitfalls

There are some other difficulties that editors will be on the lookout for when they read your chapters, including plagiarism; extraneous material, often in the form of repetition or superfluous content; and sometimes even some objectionable content.

Let’s look at each in turn.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is when material has been taken from another source without permission. Plagiarism is illegal, so if plagiarized material gets published in a Packt book that can cause legal problems for the author and the company.

In order to avoid this problem, we use a software checker called iThenticate. Every chapter gets run through iThenticate to discover whether any of it has been plagiarized. If the checker picks up plagiarized material, your editor will politely notify you of what needs to be rewritten.

Important note

Packt has a two-strike policy on plagiarism. That means that you will only get one warning for plagiarized content. If there is a second instance, your book is likely to be cancelled.

Occasionally, you may wish to reuse some of you own work which has already been published somewhere else, like a blog or journal. Unfortunately, just because you wrote it does not necessarily mean that you own it! It’s best to simply rewrite it to avoid any potential trouble down the line.

Of course, plagiarism is not the only potential hazard.

Repetition and superfluity

There are occasionally valid reasons to repeat yourself: when summarizing, for instance. Or you might repeat a point in order to contrast it with another point. Often, however, authors repeat themselves without meaning to.

Be aware of what you are writing. If your editor thinks you might be saying the same thing again – whether that’s repeating a general sentiment or word-for-word repetition – they will draw your attention to it.

Occasionally an author might leave a point unfinished and move onto another point before returning to the original point to add more detail. Try to avoid doing this – even if little or no information is actually being repeated, it can feel like repetition.

The same goes for superfluous material. That can include:

* Lengthy personal anecdotes.
* Taking too long to get to the practical steps in the chapter.
* Extensive development history of the technology.
* Too many references to external sources which can lead the reader away from the book.

The general rule of thumb is that if it is not directly relevant to what the reader is learning, it can probably be removed.

Any additional material that may interest the reader can be included in a Further reading section.

Objectionable material

This may not come up often, but it is very important to maintain an awareness about objectionable material. Packt will not knowingly allow a book to be published which contains language which may cause offense. Authors whose chapters contain objectionable material may not mean harm, but they may inadvertently or unknowingly repeat language or cultural assumptions which can cause offense.

Be extra careful when discussing any of the following:

* Gender
* Race
* Religion
* Cultural differences
* Specific individuals

Not all such references will have the potential for causing offense! You can do some research online if you aren’t sure, but it’s often best to avoid these topics altogether. If you are unsure about something, consult your editor.

If you are working with datasets, please make sure that there is nothing objectionable within the data. Some commonly used datasets have been around for decades and carry the biases of the people who originally compiled them.

One example is the well-known Boston Housing dataset, which includes statistics comparing Black population with crime rates. If you were intending to use this dataset or another which includes contentious classes, please exchange it for a different dataset. There are plenty of alternatives available; in the case of the Boston Housing data, there is a cleaned-up version with the offending classes removed which is easy to find.

Of course, your first draft is only part of writing. Once your editor has read it, they will provide you with feedback.

Responding to feedback

Once your chapter is written, you will have to submit it for editing. There are two main ways your editor will provide you with feedback:

* Leaving notes on the chapter itself as marginal comments.
* Emailing general bullet-point thoughts.

We’ll discuss both methods in this section.

Receiving comments

Comments are the most effective way for an editor to provide detailed observations and feedback on a chapter. Your editor will highlight a word, sentence, or paragraph, and enter their comments in a text box at the side of the page. An editor might use a comment to suggest an alternative phrasing, ask questions, or correct a mistake. Feel free to reply to these comments if you have questions!

Important note

Please do not turn off Track Changes or delete any of the editor’s comments! It’s much easier to edit a revised chapter if everyone can easily see what’s been changed.

Many editors like to leave a comment on the chapter title, commonly referred to as a global comment, in which they will offer a summarized version of their appraisal of the chapter.

A screenshot of a social media post

Description automatically generated

Figure 1.8 – An example of a global comment.

Now, it’s time to think about our direct communications.

Communicating with your editor

Emails are our primary form of communication between authors and editors. As the more detailed notes will be in the form of comments on the chapter, emails tend to be shorter and less complex, highlighting a few key issues that need improving and give a brief explanation for what you can do.

Important note

If you have preferences for other communication methods, such as Teams, then do let the team know and we will make adjustments to best fit your needs.

After the editor returns your draft with notes, you will need to make revisions. We usually allow seven days for revisions. Once you send your revisions, the editor will re-read the chapter, check to see your response to their comments, and decide whether or not the chapter needs more work.

There is no official number of revisions an editor can ask an author to do, but there is a time limit. Books have set release dates, and while moving a release date may occasionally be unavoidable, we always try to meet these dates. That means that there is some time pressure, and we try not to spend months on each chapter. On the other hand, we won’t accept a chapter until it’s ready. Ultimately, it is up to all of us to ensure that every chapter meets Packt’s standards to create a book that you are proud of.

Once the editor is satisfied with a chapter, they will accept it. Once all of the Preliminary Drafts (PDs) of a book have been accepted, you will have a chance to make any further revisions, taking onboard feedback from the Technical Reviewer, at the Final Draft (FD) stage.

When the FDs are all accepted, the book can be proofread, sent to the design department for layouts, and published!

That covers all of the writer’s work on a Packt book. Let’s briefly recap what we’ve covered.

Summary

Over the course of this chapter, we have learned about how to write a Packt chapter. We looked at the Word template and how to use various styles correctly so that the final book will be printed with the correct styles, as well as the two dominant ways of structuring Packt books.

After covering those topics, we then discussed some ways to think about the actual content of a chapter, including topic coverage, readability, and a brief discussion of image use. We followed that up with some of the problems need to avoid: specifically, plagiarism, repetition and superfluity, and objectionable material.

Finally, we covered how to discuss feedback with the editor. Most feedback is delivered as comments directly on the document, delivered by email.

That concludes this chapter! Hopefully, it will help you on your exciting journey as the author of a Packt book.