

Write Docs Devs Love

Ten Tricks to Level Up Your Tech Writing

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What is Tech Writing?

- Think of that feeling you get when you follow an online tutorial or piece of documentation and the code works on the first run.
- Now think of all the hours spent wasted following broken, outdated, or incomplete documentation.
- What is the difference? What made one good and the other bad?
- Technical Writing is instructional or informative writing that focuses on how to accomplish a task using a specific tool
 - These tools can be hardware, software, and everywhere in between

Why is Technical Writing Important?

- Usually the first impression someone has of your project
 - If they don't like it, *they will leave and find another tool*
- Teaches users about a new project/code they didn't know about
 - When was the last time you found a new project just browsing source code?
 - A projects README is tech writing, so don't count that.
- Teaches users how to use your project **effectively and safely**
 - Imagine if your vehicle manual said "Fill up the tire with air" instead of "Fill up the tire with air to 35 psi"
- Helps build a community around your project
 - Likely to bring people back
 - People will want to contribute
 - People will tell their friends about the project

Mason's Top 10 Tips for Improving

- Disclaimer: These are my Tips and Tricks
 - This is what has helped me after spending two years writing tutorials and working with professional editors at DigitalOcean
 - Just because something didn't make it on this list doesn't make it invalid
 - Picking just 10 was *tough*

Tip #10 - Make Your End Goal Clear

- Have a clear, concise goal in your documentation in the first paragraph
 - This library allows you to do X
 - In this tutorial you'll use X and Y to build Z
- If you're writing a tutorial, don't spend 1000 words telling your reader how great the technology is.
 - They already know this, that's why they are reading your tutorial.
 - The reader wants to get something done
- Make it blatantly obvious what your reader will have learned, built, accomplished, understood, etc. by the end of reading the documentation

Readability

Grade 6

Good

Words: 133

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Tip #9 - Don't Be Overly Verbose

- Technical documentation should be concise, not a novel
 - If you want to write a tech novel, go for it. They are hilarious
- SAT words are not needed here
 - Always assume the readers of your documentation don't speak the same language as you
- Aim for a low reading level
 - Tools like Grammarly and <https://hemingwayapp.com/> will give you the estimated grade level readability of your writing
 - I aim for 3rd grade reading level. The highest I allow myself to go is 6th

Tip #8 - Use Inclusive Language

- Avoid gendered language and go for more gender neutral pronouns.
 - Don't be afraid to use second person.
 - "Next you will"
 - If you're looking for second person plural, I *love* the word y'all
- Avoid using known internet slang that can be viewed as derogatory
 - Noobs, 10x Developers, Dummies
 - "Top 10 Tips for JavaScript Noobs"
- Avoid words that can make someone question or doubt their skills
 - What is "simple" or "easy" to someone might be challenging to someone else
 - "Simply install Python from source"

Tip #7 - Limit Technical Jargon

- *Jargon* - special words or expressions that are used by a particular profession or group and are difficult for others to understand.
- Overuse of Jargon can make it difficult for beginners to grok your content
 - See what I did there? Grok?
- Knowing your audience will help you decide how much jargon you can use
 - Are you writing internal documentation for your team? Probably can use some jargon related to the system
- Assume beginners if you don't know your audience
 - Beginners will appreciate you and experts will skim over it
 - You can also have a statement stating who your documentation is for

Tip #6 - Define ALL Acronyms

- Tech has *way too many* acronyms
 - We even have some acronyms that can mean two different things
- Acronyms can easily scare away readers
 - New learners often feel insecure and intimidated by Tech
 - Acronyms feed this fear
- Write out the full name of the acronym when you first introduce it
 - “You’ll need to add a record to the Domain Name System, DNS, to ...”
- If you plan to use the acronym for the rest of the documentation, say so
 - “You’ll need to add a record to the Domain Name System, DNS, to ... We’ll refer to the Domain Name System as DNS for the remainder of this tutorial”
- Define all acronyms used in the tutorial at the beginning or end and link back to them when you use them

Tip #5 - Avoid Memes/Idioms and Regional Language

- Avoid using memes and idioms unless you are positive who your audience is
 - Idioms - a group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words
 - “Pull out all the stops”
 - “Piece of cake”
 - “Costs an arm and a leg”
 - Your 6 coworkers will probably understand these, a global audience of people who might have never seen Spongebob might not
- Avoid using regional language that might confuse native and non-native speakers
 - “Performing this command will totally trash your system”
 - “Don’t use this library, it’s dodgy”

Tip #4 - Use Meaningful Code Samples and Variable Names

- Use examples of real problems your code can solve
 - Readers want to know what problems your code solves, show them
 - Very often readers just skip to code, if you have good examples they may get their entire answer from a single code block
- Use meaningful variable names
 - We all say “Code should be self documenting”, well the documentation should be as well
 - Foo and Bar are useless. They need to go
- Include *everything* that is needed to run the code
 - This includes things like import statements
- Always have a completed copy of the code for copy/pasting
 - If you have a tutorial where you walk the user step by step with little code blocks, have one large codeblock at the end with the completed code

Tip #3 - Don't Make Your Reader Leave Your Docs

- Avoid sending your reader to many other sites/links
 - Everything necessary to complete task should be in your article
 - Copying a few steps from another set of documentation is better than sending the user to many different sites
- If you are going to make your reader leave your article, have a reason and a way to bring them back
 - Do it at the beginning
 - Have a list of prerequisites at the very beginning that need to be completed before doing the tutorial.
 - Link out to these and direct the reader where to learn/accomplish the prerequisite
 - Don't just say "Go install Python". Give them a tutorial that sets them up for success and tell them to come back when they have finished
 - This also allows you to control and write for that specific environment

Tip #2 - Make Your Content Scannable

- Make it easy for the reader to find a single piece of information
 - Beginners tend to read entire posts while experienced users will scan for the information that they need
- Use Headings and SubHeadings to break up content
 - Outline big changes such as a next step or change of context
 - When paired with a Table of Contents it lets users find what they are looking for much easier
- Use consistent style when writing
 - Ex: Make all library names **bold** and all file paths in *italics*
 - The user will quickly pick up on this style and it will make the content more scannable
 - Consistency is key!

Tip #1 - Verify Your Instructions! Test, Test, Test!

- Always verify your instructions and test your work
 - The only thing worse than no documentation is incorrect documentation
- If possible, someone else test your work also
 - Having an editor, peer, teammate, or friend work through the documentation can help you find lapses
- Use a fresh environment for your testing
 - Attempt to remove all bias from your development environment. Your shortcuts, packages, and tools might not be on your readers workstation

Bonus Tip! - Practice, Practice, Practice

- The best way to get better at technical writing is to write
- Set aside a set amount of time daily/weekly to just write
 - You don't have to publish it.
 - Don't throw it away. Save it in a folder. You never know when you might want to dust it off

How You Can Get Started in Technical Writing

- Write documentation at work
 - There is always something to be documented
- Start a blog
 - The best part about a blog is it can be freer. You can write tutorials and blog posts
 - Great for practicing
- Contribute to Open Source Projects
 - Many Open Source Projects need help with documentation
 - Hacktoberfest is a great place to start
 - It's where I started

That's all for this time!

- Follow me on Twitter [@masonegger](https://twitter.com/masonegger)
- Join me for an Open Space on Synthetic Data!
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 - Slides can be found on my website
mason.dev/speaking/docs-devs-love