Verbs, not Nouns

Writing Documentation Users Want to Read

Brian MacDonald
TechBash 2025
Slides: https://github.com/bmacdonald-editor/techbash2025

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Two Types of Docs

- Reference
- Tutorial

Reference docs

- Comprehensive
- Focus on the product
- Quick retrieval

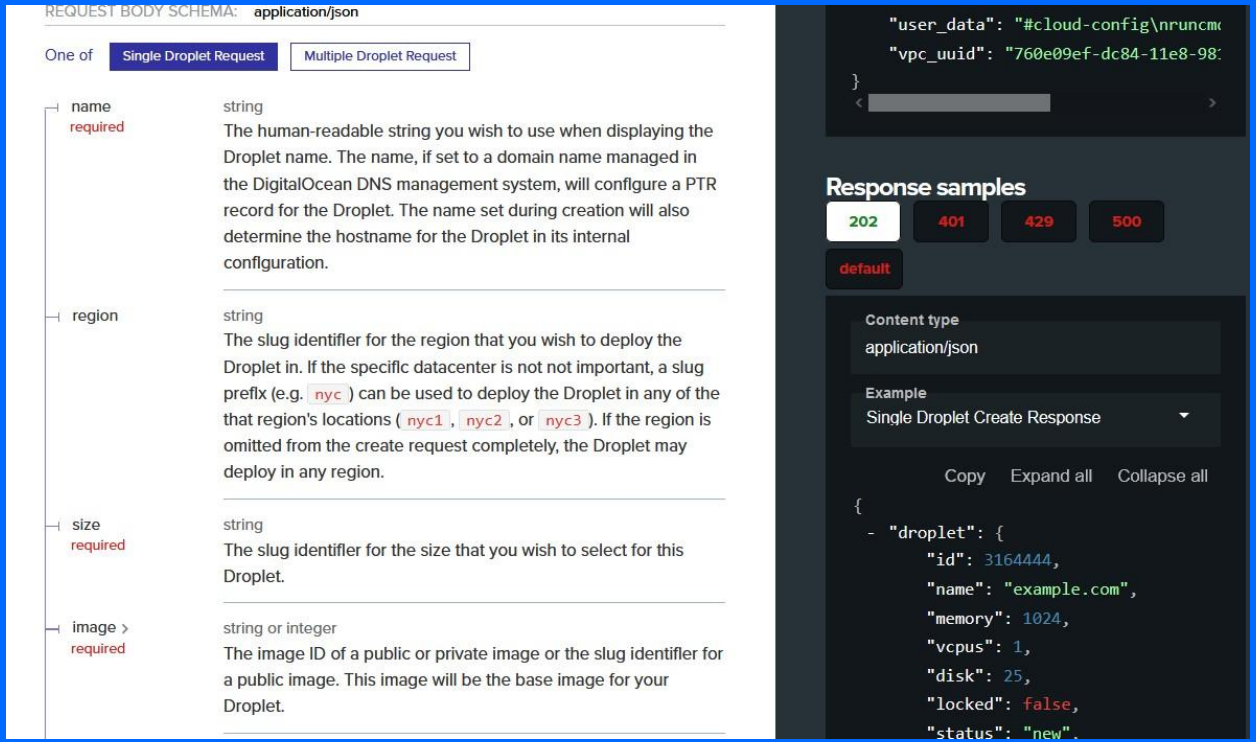
Reference docs

man pages

API references

code comments

readme files



Source: DigitalOcean API documentation

Tutorial docs

- Not comprehensive
- Focus on the user
- Read beginning to end

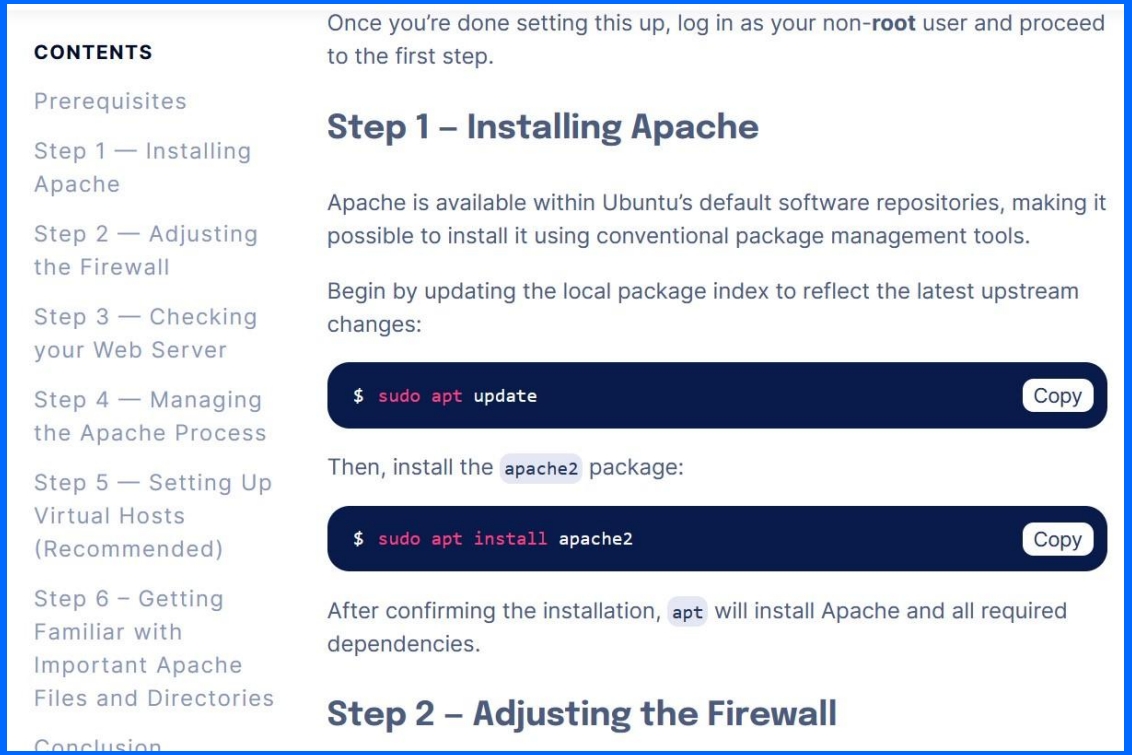
Tutorial docs

Tutorials

How-tos

Walkthroughs

Use cases



CONTENTS

Prerequisites

Step 1 — Installing Apache

Step 2 — Adjusting the Firewall

Step 3 — Checking your Web Server

Step 4 — Managing the Apache Process

Step 5 — Setting Up Virtual Hosts (Recommended)

Step 6 – Getting Familiar with Important Apache Files and Directories

Conclusion

Once you're done setting this up, log in as your non-**root** user and proceed to the first step.

Step 1 – Installing Apache

Apache is available within Ubuntu's default software repositories, making it possible to install it using conventional package management tools.

Begin by updating the local package index to reflect the latest upstream changes:

```
$ sudo apt update
```
Copy

Then, install the `apache2` package:

```
$ sudo apt install apache2
```
Copy

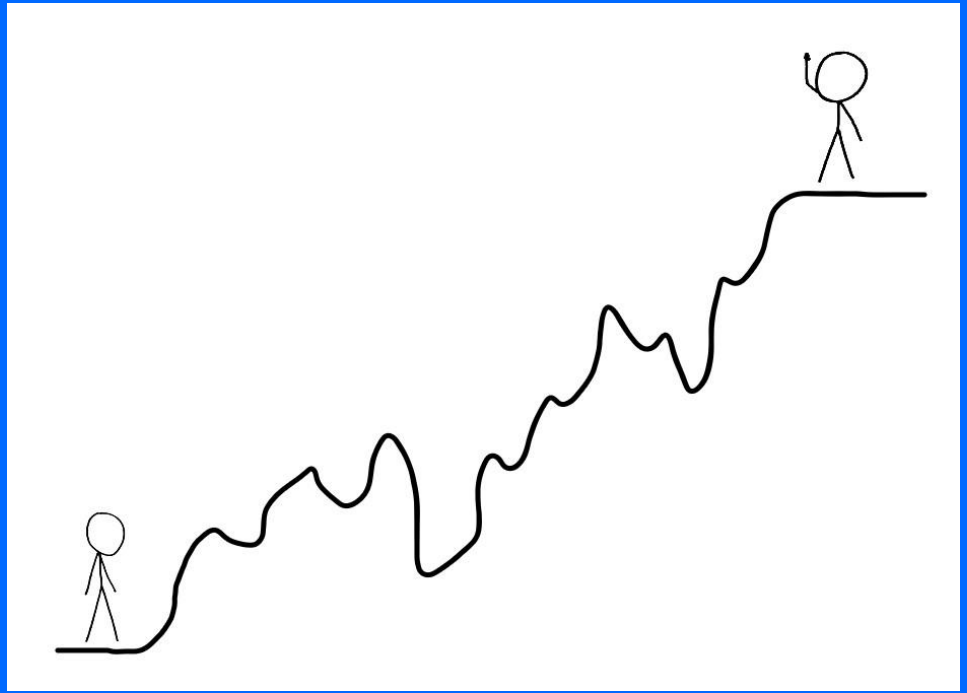
After confirming the installation, `apt` will install Apache and all required dependencies.

Step 2 – Adjusting the Firewall

Source: How To Install the Apache Web Server on Ubuntu 22.04, by Erin Glass and Jeanelle Horcasitas

Tutorials Tell a Story

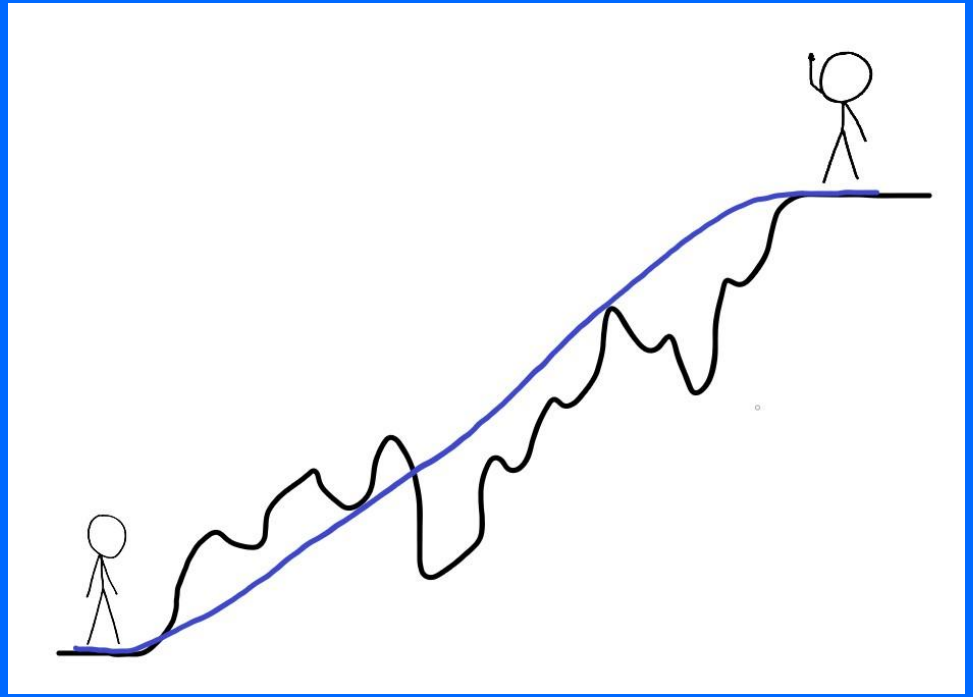
The user is the hero



Stick Figures © Randall Munroe, xkcd.com

Tutorials Tell a Story

Tutorials smooth the user's path



Stick Figures © Randall Munroe, xkcd.com

References are Nouns

They tell you what something IS

When You Organize by Noun

File menu

New - Opens a new document. If you use the keyboard combination indicated on the right a blank document opens immediately. Selecting the New menu item with your cursor gives the opportunity to open a large number of types of documents.

Open - Opens a previously saved document.

Close - Closes the active document but does not quit the application.

Save - Saves the active document with its current file name, location and format.

Save As - Saves by opening a window which gives the opportunity to change the file name, location or format.

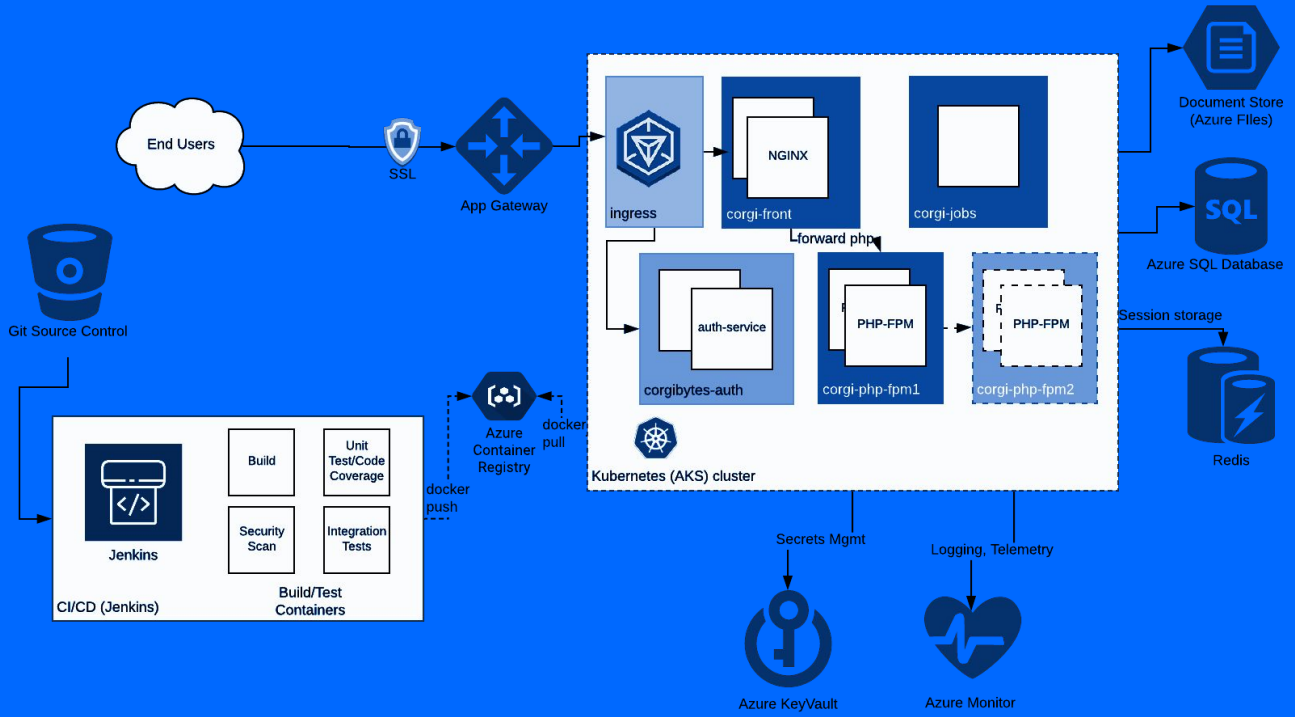
Page Setup - Sets margins, paper size, orientation and other layout options.

Print Preview - Shows how the file will look when you print it.

Print - Prints the active file, also gives the opportunity to change print options

Exit - Closes Microsoft Word.

When You Organize by Noun



Tutorials are Verbs

They tell you how to
DO something

When you organize by verb

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Step 2 – Adjusting the Firewall

Not all Verbs are equal

Install

Create

Test

Automate

Configure

Monitor

Integrate

Deploy

Secure

Troubleshoot

Not all Verbs are equal

Know

Understand

Use

Learn

Not all Verbs are equal

You'll ~~learn how to~~ add a server to your cluster.
You'll add a server to your cluster.

~~You'll understand how to~~ configure your firewall.
Configure your firewall.

Grammar Pedantry Moment

Gerunds end in “-ing”

Install → Installing
Configure → Configuring
Troubleshoot → Troubleshooting

How to Make Documentation

Don’t just start writing…

Brainstorm!

Outline Your Doc First

- What do you want users to do?

Outline Your Doc First

- What do you want users to do?
- Ask the users, if you can

Outline Your Doc First

- What do you want users to do?
- Ask the users, if you can
- Write down everything

Outline Your Doc First

- What do you want users to do?
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- Define discrete steps

Outline Your Doc First

- What do you want users to do?
- Ask the users, if you can
- Write down everything
- Define discrete steps
- Prioritize the use cases

Live Demo Time

Writing at the step level

Writing at the step level

- Look for the verb

How To View a Web Page

1. Enter the URL
2. Press Enter

Writing at the step level

- Look for the verb
- Steps should be complete, and in order

How To View a Web Page

1. Start the browser
2. Click in the address bar
3. Type in the URL
4. Press Enter

Writing at the step level

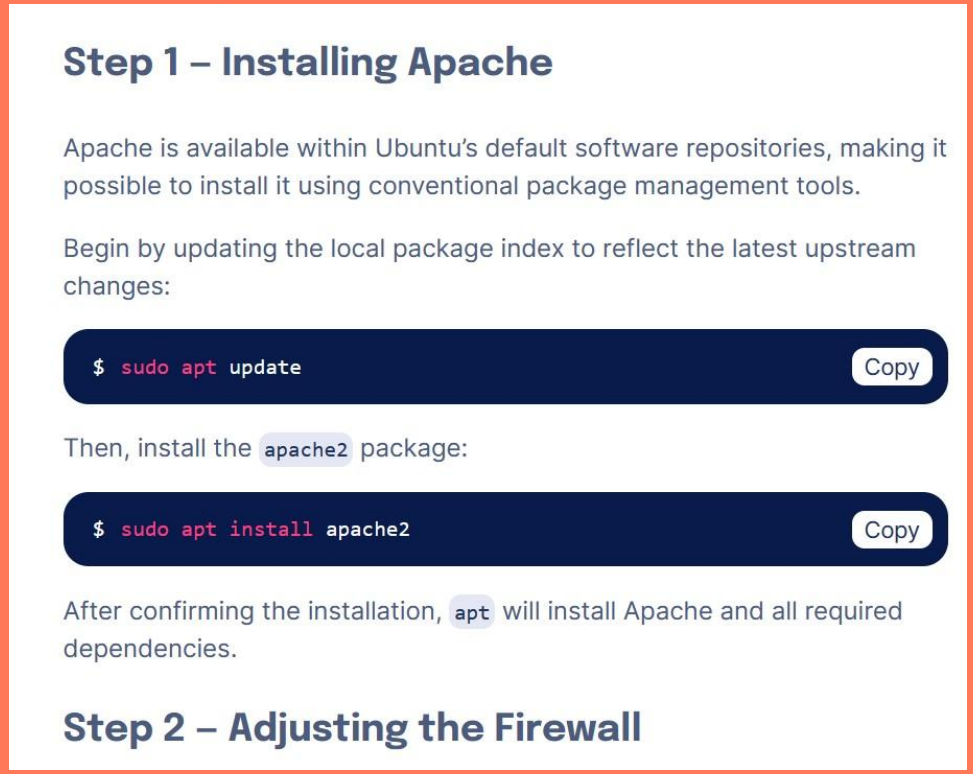
- **Look for the verb**
- **Steps should be in order**
- **Practice “just in time” learning**

How To View a Web Page

1. **Start the browser**
2. **Click in the address bar**
3. **Type in the web address**
    a. A web address is also called a URL. It represents a location on the web to navigate to.
4. **Press Enter**

Writing at the step level

- Look for the verb
- Steps should be in order
- Practice “just in time” learning
- Keep them short



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Writing at the step level

- Look for the verb
- Steps should be in order
- Practice “just in time” learning
- Keep them short
- Use signposts

Writing at the step level

- **Look for the verb**
- **Steps should be in order**
- **Practice “just in time” learning**
- **Keep them short**
- **Use signposts**
  - Introduction
  - Transitions
  - Conclusion

Writing at the step level

The installation process will ask you about importing a GPG key. Confirm it so the installation can complete.

Now that you have Certbot installed, let's run it to get a certificate.

Step 2 – Confirming Nginx's Configuration

Certbot needs to be able to find the correct `server` block in your Nginx configuration for it to be able to automatically configure SSL. Specifically, it does this by looking for a `server_name` directive that matches the domain you request a certificate for.

Source: How To Secure Nginx with Let's Encrypt on Rocky Linux 9, by Alex Garnett

Writing at the paragraph level

Writing at the paragraph level

- Keep it concise

To add the Rocky Linux 9 EPEL repository, run the following command:

```
$ sudo dnf install epel-release
```

Copy

When asked to confirm the installation, type and enter `y`.

Now that you have access to the extra repository, install all of the required packages:

```
$ sudo dnf install certbot python3-certbot-nginx
```

Copy

This will install Certbot itself and the Nginx plugin for Certbot, which is needed to run the program.

The installation process will ask you about importing a GPG key. Confirm it so the installation can complete.

Now that you have Certbot installed, let's run it to get a certificate.

Source: How To Secure Nginx with Let's Encrypt on Rocky Linux 9, by Alex Garnett

Writing at the paragraph level

- Keep it concise
- Make it relevant

Writing at the paragraph level

- Keep it concise
- Make it relevant
- Avoid subheadings

Step 1. Installing Apache

```
sudo apt install apache2
```

Step 2. Configuring Apache

a. Adjusting the Firewall
b. Checking the Server
c. Managing the Processes
d. Setting Up Virtual Hosts
e. Configuring Log Files

Conclusion

Writing at the paragraph level

- Keep it concise
- Make it relevant
- Avoid subheadings

Step 1. Installing Apache

```
sudo apt install apache2
```

Step 2. Configuring Apache
Step 3. Adjusting the Firewall
Step 4. Checking the Server
Step 5. Managing the Processes
Step 6. Setting Up Virtual Hosts
Step 7. Configuring Log Files
Conclusion

Writing at the sentence level

Writing at the sentence level

- **Look for the verb**

The firewall settings are the next thing you need to change, so open the config file to do that.

Writing at the sentence level

- **Look for the verb**

The firewall settings are the next thing you need to change, so open the config file to do that.

Open the config file to change the firewall settings.

Writing at the sentence level

- **Look for the verb**
- **Use active voice**

The `newuser` command is used to create a new user.

Writing at the sentence level

- **Look for the verb**
- **Use active voice**

The `newuser` command is used to create a new user.

Create a new user with the `newuser` command.

Writing at the sentence level

- **Look for the verb**
- **Use active voice**
- **Keep it short**

Configure the firewall by opening the config file for editing, navigating to the allowed ports section, adding the ports that you want to open, and saving the file.

Writing at the sentence level

- **Look for the verb**
- **Use active voice**
- **Keep it short**

Configure the firewall by opening the config file for editing, navigating to the allowed ports section, adding the ports that you want to open, and saving the file.

Configure the firewall by opening the config file for editing. Navigate to the allowed ports section. Add the ports that you want to open. Then save the file.

Writing tone

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**

It is important to remember that security is critical to the functioning of a well-maintained system. Therefore, plan your firewall configuration to allow access only on those ports essential to business needs.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**

~~It is important to remember that~~ security is critical to the functioning of a well-maintained system. ~~Therefore~~, plan your firewall configuration to allow access only on those ports ~~essential to business needs~~.

Configure your firewall to open only the ports you need to.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**
- **Address the reader in second-person: “you”**

Next, we’ll create a dedicated user for the database instance.

Writing tone

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Next, we’ll create a dedicated user for the database instance.

Next, you’ll create a dedicated user for the database instance.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**
- **Address the reader in second-person: “you”**
- **Use your audience’s vocabulary**

You will create a modal that appears with a no-JavaScript approach using the `:target` pseudo class and the `opacity`, `pointer-events`, and `transition` properties.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**
- **Address the reader in second-person: “you”**
- **Use your audience’s vocabulary**
- **Avoid “easy” and “simple”**

Configuring a new container in Kubernetes isn’t as hard as it sounds. You simply add the proper YAML to the kubectl file.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**
- **Address the reader in second-person: “you”**
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Configuring a new container in Kubernetes isn’t as hard as it sounds. You simply add the proper YAML to the kubectl file.

To configure a new container in Kubernetes, you add the proper YAML to the kubectl file.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**
- **Address the reader in second-person: “you”**
- **Use your audience’s vocabulary**
- **Avoid “easy” and “simple”**
- **No marketing copy**

FooBar is a powerful new JavaScript framework that allows you to load complex UIs at lightning speed.

Writing tone

- **Be confident casual**
- **Address the reader in second-person: “you”**
- **Use your audience’s vocabulary**
- **Avoid “easy” and “simple”**
- **No marketing copy**

FooBar is a powerful new JavaScript framework that allows you to load complex UIs at lightning speed.

Foobar is a JavaScript framework that allows you to load complex UIs more quickly.

Final Words

- ***Look*** **for the verbs**
- ***Focus*** **on what the users want to do**
- ***Move*** **the verbs up front**

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TechBash 2025

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