When All Else Fails There’s always the Manual  
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**When All Else Fails There’s always the Manual**

When someone mentions ‘user manuals’ it probably draws mental images of a tediously verbose, confusing, and difficult to navigate booklets. Because of the negative connotation many people skip reading the manual which results in product failures, lost time, and in some cases even loss of life.

In order to improve on this experience criteria and a collection of common characteristics needs to be identified. To better understand the difference a well written manual on installation of a motherboard is compared to the classically horrible Monopoly game.

# Navigation

The first criteria of a good user manual is that it can be easily navigated in a short amount of time. After all it doesn’t do any good to have beautifully written instructions if no one can find the relevant part of their scenario.

To create a document with good navigation, it is important to start with a table of contents and end with an index. The content in the middle needs numbered steps and headers. This pattern enables readers to jump right to the part of interest (Dobrin, Keller, & Weisser, 2010)

One additional navigation feature that Asus used was to color a different section of the page which creates a tabbed effect when looked at from the side. This enables the reader to look at the book and quickly identify where Section I or II begins.

# Formatting

Similar to most other forms of technical writing, proper use of textual fonts and white space is critical to make the information easy to digest.

For example by denoting headers and sub heading with a bold font and increased font size, the reader will naturally chunk the document. This chunking will enable the reader to scan through the content and find answers quickly.

In the Monopoly manual the sub headings do not have different font characteristics. This makes it difficult to scan the document or identify where sections begin or end.

Another characteristic is to use a serif font on headings and san-serif fonts for the body of the document. This is because san-serif fonts are optimal for quickly reading while serif fonts are often thicker and missing the ‘feet’ that naturally glide our eyes (Gerson & Gerson, 2012).

# Command through Plan English

Good instructions are given as numerically ordered lists of short positive commands that will start with verbs (Dobrin, Keller, & Weisser, 2010). By providing directions in this format it is intuitive how the reader will traverse the steps and how to approach each task.

An example that does not follow this format would be the instruction: “If the computer is running then power it down.” The logical execution workflow required to complete this step would be:

* Parse the sentence structure
* Perform a conditional query on the state
* Based on that evaluation optionally perform an operation

With so many logical steps it is likely that the reader will have confusion or perform the task incorrectly. A better example with an easier logical workflow would have been simply, “Turn off the computer.” In the second example the logical execution workflow is only one activity.

# Graphics and Icons

It’s a bit of a clique, but a picture is worth 1,000 words. By using diagrams, fly outs, standard icons, and other visual elements the reader can quickly interpret large amounts of information.

For example in the Asus manual several diagrams are presented to show socket and connection locations on the board. These diagrams have small text to call out high level components such as “Main Power” or “CPU Socket.” In addition to this, fly out annotations are used to provide more details without overly cluttering the diagram.

# Ethical and Accurate

A good manual needs to be ethical and present instructions that will lead the audience to make the right decisions. Ethical characteristics include warning the reader of risks of: improper use, legality considerations, warrantee constraints, and instructions that lead to optimal performance.

To make warnings clearly identified warnings can leverage simple icons that show the worst case scenario of not following the directions. For example the Asus motherboard uses a lightning bolt inside of a circle to convey risk of electrical shock.

# Conclusions

User manuals are a hated, but very useful item for both the safety of the user and the product being used. In order for a manual to be useful it needs to follow certain criteria and guide lines to enable quick searching and ease of follow directions.

The criteria for effective user manuals is not very different from other forms of technical writing. By ethically writing the document in a format that is clear and concise the reader will not hate having to consult the directions and will be all the more happy.

# Bibliography

Dobrin, S., Keller, C., & Weisser, C. (2010). *Technical Communication in the Twenty-First Century.* Pearson Education.

Gerson, S., & Gerson, S. (2012). *Technical Communication. Process and Product, Seventh Edition.* Pearson Education.