

Writing Documentation that Satisfies Your Users

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Let's Write!

*The Beginning before the beginning
of the beginning of the
Epic Documentation Adventure!*

1. Evaluate just how big the documentation and the documentation project objectives are
2. Meet the people who will interact with the documentation and use the documentation
3. Make a plan for the documentation
 1. Brainstorm, set, and prioritize the goals
 2. Tactics for outlining each goal per audience
4. Examples
 1. Make them useful, correct, and not boring
5. Outline the supporting content

I consider documentation any content you create. All of the content you create must help the user achieve their goals/solve their problems.

Ask
Audit
Analyze

Ask

*Internal stakeholders
Community members, users, and
customers*

*Corporate
organization charts
are Shakespearean
comedies*

that lack happy endings. But this is another story

***Why are we creating
this content?***

Who is going to care?

Resource: [Stakeholder questionnaire](#)

Meet and listen.

Resources: User questionnaire

Do not ever.

***EVER. Tell a user that they're
using your tool wrong!***

***It's a new opportunity to innovate
and expand your market.***

- What are they trying to do with it?
- How are they trying to do it?
- With what are they trying to do it with?

Audit

Resource: Content audit spreadsheet

1. How much documentation do we already have?

- README
- Manuals (user, technical, processes, audience specific, internal, glossary, index, reference)
- Tutorials (new, intermediate, advanced, focused on other applicable audiences)
- Code comments
- API
- Quickstarts
- FAQs
- Forum/mailing list
- IRC logs
- Issue tracker
- Wiki
- Blog posts/news announcements
- Training materials/presentations
- Videos
- Podcasts/Audio recordings

2. Where does it live.
3. Who creates it?
4. Who maintains it?
5. Who reviews/approves it?
6. Who publishes it?
7. Who archives it?
8. Is it up-to-date/correct?
9. Is its quality (writing/recording/structure/example material) acceptable?
10. What metadata is it associated with?
11. What is it linked too?
12. Who uses it?

The Spreadsheet of Doom

Analysis

*What are we looking
for?*

Audience segments

Workflows

Use cases

Traffic jams

1. Prioritize your biggest audience
2. Prioritize their biggest documentation needs

*Can we start writing
now?*

No.

**Two words: Scope
Creep**

The Strategy

What will we write?

Who will write it?

What does that person need?

Who will review it?

What will it look like?

Where will it live?

When will it be published?

1. What will help the users who have this problem solve it?
 1. New users: basic component tutorials, getting oriented tutorials, how-to use the tools tutorials
 2. Intermediate users: more advanced tutorials, user manual, case studies, tips and tricks
2. What will help the people who can help solve this problem to share their knowledge?
 1. New developers: basic code overview, glossaries, contributor guide, API docs

Now?

Yes, now.

Writing a Tutorial

1. Plot each goal like a screenwriter (or a mad scientist ...)
2. Be brutal and slash the backstory/history/personal commentary
3. Get right into the action
4. Show, don't tell
5. Introduce the main characters by their full and proper names (no slang/jargon/lingo)
6. Define terms, never assume
7. Concisely describe the environment (i.e. get them oriented)
8. The arc
9. The conclusion
10. The next goal/stage

1. What are the 1-3 things that will learn or achieve when they complete this tutorial?
 1. Be specific!
2. Are there prerequisites?
 1. List previous tutorials/lessons that should be completed.
3. Are there dependencies?
 1. Dependencies should be part of the tutorial and/or part of the things they will achieve in completing the tutorials.
4. What type of example will illustrate each step. (code, console, text, screenshot, video, audio, figure, illustration, etc.)
5. What would that example include (input, output, elements from previous tutorials, new materials that need to be introduced, etc.)
6. What content is needed to support the examples?
7. What resources should the tutorial link to?
8. What is the next step for the user once they've completed the tutorial?

Example Types

Anatomy

Explicit

Boring

Real

For tutorials, creating the examples first is one tactic for keeping the tutorial concise and on target.

Anatomy

Anatomy of a basic block quote

[quote, attribution, citation title and information]

Quote or excerpt text

Clearly define each part of an example, I call these anatomy examples.

Why? Because, at least in the technology sector, words such as type, component, module, style, option, context, attribute, value, key, element, name, tag, etc. are overloaded with ambiguous meanings, misunderstands, and disagreement.

Therefore, saying: “Assign the optional values to the options list” can have different meanings for users depending on their background.

Explicit

Block quote example

.After landing the cloaked Klingon bird of prey in Golden Gate park: ①
[quote, Captain James T. Kirk, Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home] ② ③ ④
Everybody remember where we parked. ⑤

- ① Mark lead-in text explaining the context or setting of the quote using a period. (optional)
- ② For content that doesn't require the preservation of line breaks, set quote in the first position of the attribute list.
- ③ The second position contains who the excerpt is attributed to.
(optional)
- ④ Enter additional citation information in the third position. (optional)
- ⑤ Enter the excerpt or quote text on the line immediately following the attribute list

After anatomy examples, I like to include basic examples that are explicitly labeled with callouts.

The Boring Factor

Apostrophe example

Olaf's desk overflowed with heaps of paper, apple cores and squeaky toys.
We couldn't find his keyboard.

The state of his desk was replicated, sometimes in triplicate, across all

Users may skim over/not pay attention to examples that follow the same form/function of examples that were created 10 years ago and/or have become a cliche in your industry.

The Reality Factor

No one sets up such a basic project.

No one uses all those options in the same argument at the same time.

Instead, use examples you learned from your users when you met with them. This also engages and thanks the community.

*Make Sure It's
Correct*

*After landing the cloaked Klingon bird of prey
in Golden Gate park:*

**“Everybody remember where
we parked.**

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home

— Captain James T. Kirk

The End (of the Tutorial)

***Revisit what they achieved in
the tutorial.***

Quiz question 1 of 2

Which Ruby method gets string input?

A

puts

B

gets

Skip Quiz ➔

Review video ▶

Reviewing the video will require you to retake this quiz in order to complete this stage.

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Help users remember what they learned.

The Next Step

***If you don't point your users toward
the next lesson and related
resources, it's like abandoning them
on Everest without shoes or shorts.***

How would you feel?

The End (of the Presentation)

Visit [**graphitefriction.com/decks**](https://graphitefriction.com/decks) for more resources.

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