World of a Technical Writer

A TIMELESS TRIAL TO DECIPHER, EXAMINE, AND ILLUSTRATE ABSTRACT CONCEPTS AND DATA.

LEARNING SESSIONS

Back to Basics – The 10 Golden Rules of Technical Writing

POSTED BY SHH... · FEBRUARY 3, 2013 · 5 COMMENTS

 FILED UNDER   COMMUNICATION, GOLDEN RULE, TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, TECHNICAL WRITER, TECHNICAL WRITING, TECHNOLOGY, VIDEOGAMES, WRITING AND EDITING

It was a refresher to spend a friday evening listening to Leah Guren sharing her insights acquired from a 30 year old career in Technical communication. She talked about the fundamentals that lay at the core of Technical Writing. The focus was on what process is followed, what are the right questions to be raised, how well the information is analyzed rather than any particular tools or domain. The talk was titled "The Golden Rules (Technical communication theory and application)".

She discussed 10 Golden rules that work for all types of TC projects and provide a practical methodology. These golden rules are a result of Leah's own experience and research.

#1. Paper is Permanent

It's about owning what I am writing. It says "I am responsible for what I am writing". So its important to write correctly, proof read and edit the documents properly and provide a proper structure to the content.

Lets see why is it so important…..

- Users judge the quality of product, s/w based on the quality of documentation.
- *Quality* states the measure of accuracy (absence of errors), like typos, spellings, punctuations, incorrect data.
- *Usability* defines clear and accurate information.
- Is the content standalone?
- Can someone use it?
- Do you understand what you are writing?
- Is the information misleading or ambiguous?

Get your grammar and punctuation rules correct so as to give logical explanations to developers.

#2. Know you Audience

Who is the user, its essential to know who is going to use the document, include demographics, take into consideration the technical and product knowledge of the users, analyse the language skills of the users. Make safe assumptions.

Ask yourself

- Are you communicating to existing users, experienced users, novice users.
- How users are consuming the content, online, printed, and so on.
- Does the documentation takes care of special needs of a percentage of audience, such as color blindness?
- Are you adapting yourself to the type of audience.

<center>Who Am I?</center>

Have you heard about FOGG Index? It tells you how good or bad is your writing and does it match the learning level of your audience. Check out <u>FOGG Index</u>

- Do you engage with tech support to find out the pain points, how good is the content, what is working for the user what is not working.
- Are you taping other internal resources like marketing team to get feedback on the user docs.
- Engage with the customer.
- Create Personas. An artificial or fictitious person/s who represents the user/s, put it in front of you and check at every point, are you writing for the right person.

#3. Highlight Hazards
Watchout for things that need special attention of the user, Figure out the pain points, high risk things and use proper means to clearly specify the hazard.

As a Technical Writer your job includes:

- Finding hidden hazards through scenarios.
- Use a ranking mechanism to differentiate types of severities

1. Danger
2. Warning or Caution or Attention
3. Note

- Make hazard visually clear by placing it at the right place.
- Break it out of body text
- Highlight it, Use icons, Write imperative sentence, Use a simple do/do not statement
- Explain the ramifications and workarounds

#4. Break it Out

Do you know 7 years ago it was known that users spend 30 secs on a page to look for information. What's crucial for a Technical Writer is giving proper structure to the content so that its easier for the user to find the information.

What can you do?

- Keep the sentences short.

- Think visually and reduce the text, use graphical illustrations if useful
- Provide structure to documents, use headings, bullets, Include tables, Steps, Flowcharts for decision making and branching options in a process.
- Think about the way people need information(text, non-text).

#5. Don't write blind

If you don't understand do not write, it's your job to know what you are writing. Important to know the product you are writing about. Do not rely on second hand information. Explore the product, see it, use it, touch it because if you cannot perform the action you are writing you cannot explain it correctly. Ask open ended questions to get the right information from the SME.

#6. Be Consistent

When you are writing the same thing in three different places in the document do not write it differently each time. This is exactly the opposite of what we are taught in school. But that's the rule here. Take care of technical terminology and pick one term. It's even important for localization.

So,

- Decide how to refer to the product.
- Consider interface elements and actions
- Don't forgot styles, fonts, and layouts
- Use a style sheet.

#7. Signpost!

Use signposts to direct the user to the correct information at the appropriate place in the document. Provide proper references wherever needed. Use layout and typography to indicate relationship of elements. As part of a documentation suite make all parts aware of each other.

#8. Don't violate (legitimate) standards

- Do not use non-standard terminology.
- Recognize the difference between a legitimate(de jure) rule and a bad de facto custom. So if you find certain things to be mere customary as they have been passed from generations of writers, whereas its incorrect and is not a proper usage. Go ahead, make yourself heard and change it.
- Develop knowledge about issues relating to, regulatory and compliance such as ISO compliance, EU directives or any certifications or legal issues.

#9. Contemplate before you illustrate

Make a rational decision when you must have graphics. Sometimes you may not need it at all or maybe you may need only a part of it.

What to do,

- Use appropriate graphic types
- Use callouts or annotations to focus attention.
- Use various image views like exploded view, isometric view, and so on.
- Place the graphic after the content.

#10. Cut the fluff

Flowery, vague language is fluff also. Fluff is a serious issue with usability. So Keep it simple and short (KISS)

Common flufffs:

- formal and pompous writing
- hidden strong verbs
- unnecessary passive voice

So, these golden rules are intended to provide a user centric approach to documentation, help to justify editorial choices, and provide the analytic decision tree for all projects.

The topic was not only interesting but her approach to presenting the topic and her style of engaging with the audience made the experience even more enriching.

Note: Main points are taken from Lean Guren presentation handout notes shared with the audience.

Discussion

5 thoughts on "Back to Basics – The 10 Golden Rules of Technical Writing"

1. Thank you for sharing your knowledge. Good to read.

   POSTED BY **ANGELCANDELARIO** | FEBRUARY 12, 2013, 1:15 PM
   REPLY TO THIS COMMENT
2. Reblogged this on Tech Writer News.

   POSTED BY **ANGELCANDELARIO** | FEBRUARY 12, 2013, 1:34 PM
   REPLY TO THIS COMMENT
   - Thanks Angelcandelario

      POSTED BY **AAKANKSHA** | APRIL 18, 2013, 9:56 AM
      REPLY TO THIS COMMENT
3. Reblogged this on ryan j price and commented:
   Very helpful!

   POSTED BY **RYANJP2012** | FEBRUARY 27, 2013, 6:43 PM
   REPLY TO THIS COMMENT
   - Thanks Ryan!

POSTED BY **AAKANKSHA** | APRIL 30, 2013, 11:11 AM
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