

Writing about Process versus Writing Instructions

Keys when Writing Both Process and Instructions

1. Avoid anthropomorphism, where some inanimate object impersonates a human being.
2. Select the technical level to match your audience(s).
3. Be careful of small words (especially contractions, if you use them), as they can get lost with a fast pace.
4. Don't only tell the user what not to do; be sure to include what to do. E.g., rather than "Do not exit" say "before you exit..."
5. Do not assume that readers can see two things at once, so avoid referencing words: "before", "after", or "next".
6. Emphasize cautions, warnings, and dangers, based on these standard definitions:
CAUTION – Possibility of damage to equipment or materials.
WARNING – possibility of injury to people.
DANGER – probability of injury or death to people.
7. If you use "if" constructs, be sure you've covered all the options (i.e., "if not").
8. Consider proper use of "should", "would", "could", "might", "ought", "may", "can", and "are allowed to". What if what "should" happen doesn't, or what if they don't take your advice?

When Writing Instructions or Sequences of Steps... Remember to

1. Have your pace match your audiences' technical capability.
2. Provide introductory information: definitions, notes/cautions/warnings/dangers, etc.
3. Use numbered lists.
4. Group steps under task headings.
5. Place ONE action per step. The order is important. Otherwise, use bullets.
6. Lead off each action step with a verb. That is, each step must be parallel. (Referred to as telegraphic style.) See these instructions by example.
7. Remove extra information from the steps. Provide additional information in a separate UN-numbered line/paragraph at the same indentation.
8. Avoid embedded clauses as they force the reader to reconstruct the command.
9. Select your words carefully, as users expect more precision and accuracy with instructions. E.g., do not use vague words: "a little while" (use "4-5 seconds") or "increases" (use "doubles"). If you cannot be accurate, then use a range.
10. Be careful of dangling modifiers where the subject isn't clear.
11. If your instructions require things to be gathered beforehand, let readers know early. Do not leave readers stranded mid-step needing something. Consider having a "checklist."
12. Watch the use of small words because contractions and punctuation that can disappear.
13. Use consistent punctuation. Steps are complete sentences, so they have periods. Fragments, words, and phrases on bullets do not have punctuation.
14. Organize your instructions so they are not one long list (like this long list). Instructions are seldom read through. Break up into stages and steps.
15. Test your instructions.