

Why Free Software Needs Free Documentation

GNU philosophy

This essay was originally published on <http://gnu.org>, in 1996.

This document is part of GNU philosophy, the GNU Project's exhaustive collection of articles and essays about free software and related matters.

Copyright © 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009
Free Software Foundation, Inc.

Verbatim copying and distribution of this entire document are permitted world-wide, without royalty, in any medium, provided this notice is preserved.

Why Free Software Needs Free Documentation

The biggest deficiency in free operating systems is not in the software—it is the lack of good free manuals that we can include in these systems. Many of our most important programs do not come with full manuals. Documentation is an essential part of any software package; when an important free software package does not come with a free manual, that is a major gap. We have many such gaps today.

Once upon a time, many years ago, I thought I would learn Perl. I got a copy of a free manual, but I found it hard to read. When I asked Perl users about alternatives, they told me that there were better introductory manuals—but those were not free.

Why was this? The authors of the good manuals had written them for O'Reilly Associates, which published them with restrictive terms—no copying, no modification, source files not available—which exclude them from the free software community.

That wasn't the first time this sort of thing has happened, and (to our community's great loss) it was far from the last. Proprietary manual publishers have enticed a great many authors to restrict their manuals since then. Many times I have heard a GNU user eagerly tell me about a manual that he is writing, with which he expects to help the GNU Project—and then had my hopes dashed, as he proceeded to explain that he had signed a contract with a publisher that would restrict it so that we cannot use it.

Given that writing good English is a rare skill among programmers, we can ill afford to lose manuals this way.

Free documentation, like free software, is a matter of freedom, not price. The problem with these manuals was not that O'Reilly Associates charged a price for printed copies—that in itself is fine. (The Free Software Foundation sells printed copies of free GNU manuals, too.) But GNU manuals are available in source code form, while these manuals are available only on paper. GNU manuals come with permission to copy and modify; the Perl manuals do not. These restrictions are the problems.

The criterion for a free manual is pretty much the same as for free software: it is a matter of giving all users certain freedoms. Redistribution (including commercial redistribution) must be permitted, so that the manual can accompany every copy of the program, on line or on paper. Permission for modification is crucial too.

As a general rule, I don't believe that it is essential for people to have permission to modify all sorts of articles and books. The issues for writings are not necessarily the same as those for software. For example, I don't think you or I are obliged to give permission to modify articles like this one, which describe our actions and our views.

But there is a particular reason why the freedom to modify is crucial for documentation for free software. When people exercise their right to modify the software, and add or change its features, if they are conscientious they will change the manual too—so they can provide accurate and usable documentation with the modified program. A manual which forbids programmers from being conscientious and finishing the job, or more precisely requires them to write a new manual from scratch if they change the program, does not fill our community's needs.

While a blanket prohibition on modification is unacceptable, some kinds of limits on the method of modification pose no problem. For example, requirements to preserve the

original author's copyright notice, the distribution terms, or the list of authors, are OK. It is also no problem to require modified versions to include notice that they were modified, even to have entire sections that may not be deleted or changed, as long as these sections deal with nontechnical topics. (Some GNU manuals have them.)

These kinds of restrictions are not a problem because, as a practical matter, they don't stop the conscientious programmer from adapting the manual to fit the modified program. In other words, they don't block the free software community from making full use of the manual.

However, it must be possible to modify all the *technical* content of the manual, and then distribute the result through all the usual media, through all the usual channels; otherwise, the restrictions do block the community, the manual is not free, and so we need another manual.

Unfortunately, it is often hard to find someone to write another manual when a proprietary manual exists. The obstacle is that many users think that a proprietary manual is good enough—so they don't see the need to write a free manual. They do not see that the free operating system has a gap that needs filling.

Why do users think that proprietary manuals are good enough? Some have not considered the issue. I hope this article will do something to change that.

Other users consider proprietary manuals acceptable for the same reason so many people consider proprietary software acceptable: they judge in purely practical terms, not using freedom as a criterion. These people are entitled to their opinions, but since those opinions spring from values which do not include freedom, they are no guide for those of us who do value freedom.

Please spread the word about this issue. We continue to lose manuals to proprietary publishing. If we spread the word that proprietary manuals are not sufficient, perhaps the next person who wants to help GNU by writing documentation will realize, before it is too late, that he must above all make it free.

We can also encourage commercial publishers to sell free, copylefted manuals instead of proprietary ones. One way you can help this is to check the distribution terms of a manual before you buy it, and prefer copylefted manuals to noncopylefted ones.

Note: We maintain a page that lists free books available from other publishers.