

1 Writing user instructions



Introduction

No-one likes to read the manual. We all think we can work it out while we do the job! This usually means that the job takes too long, the kit gets broken, and people get angry! In some instances, using the equipment wrongly can be unsafe and lead to injury or even death.

So, what does a good instruction manual look like?

What is a manual for?

A manual helps people use the piece of kit safely for the intended purpose. It also includes any relevant legal information and usually includes a website for updates or further information. It is not necessary to explain the technology behind the technology. People are more likely to read shorter manuals than longer ones.

- Make sure you include what people need to know to use the equipment safely and try to keep the document as short as possible.

Who needs to read it?

Even experts who have used the equipment before may need to glance at the manual if the kit has been upgraded (including software updates) from the last model. Sometimes manuals include a page or two describing changes since the last version of the equipment or software particularly for these experts. People who use the information or output from the equipment may not need to read it. The technician who operates the X-ray machine needs to read the manual but the patient who is having X-ray does not and neither does the doctor who will use the information.

- Make sure you have a clear understanding of your reader – who they are, what they need and what they already know.

What should a good instruction manual contain?

Good manuals provide enough information for the new user to recognise the controls or parts of the kit and how to assemble it if required (e.g. inserting batteries or removing any packing bolts used

during transport). It also describes where it should be used and warn about situations where it would not be suitable, unsafe or using it might damage it. It should include clear steps on how to use the equipment and many manuals also have a 'quick start' guide showing basic operation. Appendices at the back may offer advice for more expert users. The technical specifications are also often found at the back – these may be useful if the user needs to track down a problem, do a simple repair or reset or order a replacement part.

- Make sure you have clear list of what your manual should contain and how you will organise this information before you start writing.

How should a good manual be organised?

Good manuals tend to have the same features in them. Typically, they cut up complex jobs into simple numbered steps – think of a recipe book if you want to know what works well.

The titles for the chapters and sections should also be clear about what they contain – amusing titles or sections with joke headings might be fun to write but they don't tell the reader what to expect! Many manuals include a short statement of what each section will do to make it easy for people to decide if they need to read it (e.g. 'this section shows how to set up the device to monitor temperature changes in the greenhouse').

Images, particularly with labels to show the important parts of the mechanism, are useful and software manuals often have illustrative screenshots. Captions can help to make the images more informative. Finally, include an index of the key words with page references and, if any terms are unusual or used in unusual contexts, a glossary.

- Make sure you use clear headings and features to make it easy to navigate the manual – lots of plain text without headings is difficult to read.

What about all those extra books you can buy?

It is also possible to buy books that help users to make the most of complex pieces of equipment (e.g. computers, digital recording devices) or software (e.g. network management or image manipulation software). These are often larger than the original manuals and are organised around typical tasks for the user (e.g. changing the colour balance in a photograph, preparing audio files for publishing on the web). These are not the same as the manuals that came with the original

equipment but can often provide useful extra explanations and describe particular techniques.

- Make sure your manual provides everything that is essential for the novice user and do not try to copy these longer, often expensive, expert guides.



Check yourself

You should be able to answer these questions easily after reading this sheet.

1. What is the main purpose of a manual?
2. Give two good features of a good manual.
3. Why do some manuals use images not words for instructions?



Taking it further

These activities will deepen your understanding of this topic.

1. Review the manual for a piece of kit you have used. Does it give you enough information to start? Is it easy to use and can you find the information you need easily? What are the strengths of the manual and where is it poor or confusing? Rewrite a part of the manual that you think is weak and show both the original and your upgrade to a colleague. Do they think you have improved it – and in what way? See if you can find ways for further improvements together.
2. Equipment is now made all over the world and sometimes the manufacturer has to provide manuals in multiple languages. To make this easier, they often use images rather than text to show how to use the equipment. Choose a piece of equipment and create a series of images to show a novice user how to assemble it or use it for a simple task.
3. There are many short video clips available online to show how to use a piece of kit. Find one that you think does the job particularly well and explain why you think it works so well. What features do they use that make it clear? Then try to make your own video clip that could explain how to use a piece of kit you are an expert with.