

Tutoring Guide for Technical Writing: User Manuals

The Assignment in General

A user manual remains one of the largest documents a technical writer can create. A user manual serves to inform or teach a user how to use a product or perform a task. A tutor should not confuse literary and language skills with documentation skills. Technical writers utilize a number of writing styles within one manual, including explanations, instructions, bulleted lists, and notes.

The Paper's Structure and Development

Manuals can include four different writing styles unique to technical writing. Tutors can assist writers in any of these four areas.

1. **Explanations**
 - » Ask the writer to clarify any language that seems confusing.
 - » Remind the writer that all explanations need to be written on the user's reading level.
2. **Instructions**
 - » Ask the writer if she would like you to serve as the usability tester.
 - » Ask the writer questions about the audience to ensure the writer is truly familiar with her audience.
3. **Bulleted Lists**
 - » Ask the writer if the list of information should go in chronological order. If so, then the list should be numbered.
 - » Bulleted lists are comprised of lists of items, necessary steps, or other information that may be listed in any order.
4. **Notes**
 - » Ask the writer if there are any areas in the text that need a note.
 - » Remind the writer that notes should be set off and noticeable to the reader.

Of Special Note

- *Explanations* include introductions, conclusions, actual product descriptions, and properly phrased questions.
- *Instructions* are a numbered list of steps a user follows to accomplish a task. Tutors can serve as usability testers by following the instructions and providing feedback.
- *Notes* are important messages (e.g. danger, warning).