

How to Write a Great User Guide for Almost Anything

By Allen Smith, eHow User



There used to be a time when after buying a kitchen appliance, clock radio or some complicated software program, it would come with extensive instructions telling you how to use it. Those days are gone. Now, the factory supplied user guide consists of three pages of instructions, two of them in other languages.

Great user guides are worth their weight in gold. And if you know how to write one, you'll be a hero! Here's how to get started putting one together.

Difficulty: Moderate

Instructions

things you'll need:

- Personal Computer
- Microsoft Word or other word processing program
- Collection of clip art or digital photographs
- Internet Connection and browser
- Simple web page authoring software
- Email program

- 1 The key to a well-written user guide is organization, clear and concise language and anticipating not only what users of your product will DO but also what they will NOT do. You must anticipate and write for both.
- 2 Decide on the format of the user guide. You can write guides as emails, printed documents, web pages or all of the above. Once you write in one format it's easy to transfer it to another.
- 3 Start at the beginning. Write the steps that are necessary in SIMPLE and methodical steps.
- 4 If appropriate, try breaking up the text with photos, illustrations or diagrams. Making the reader wade through seas of endless text is a guaranteed way to lose them.
- 5 At various intervals, alert the reader of what NOT to do. This helps to cut down on the frustration level when learning a new product or application.
- 6 Provide the reader with other resources they can use in addition to your guide.

Tips & Warnings

- Write in very simple terms. Even though it may seem easy to you, it may not be for your reader.
- Decide on the best format for writing your user guide. Some people are more comfortable reading a printed document they can hold and file away. In other situations, it may be easier to be able to send a user a URL or link to a document on your

website.

- Use high quality graphics, clip [art](#) and photos to enhance the look of your document and make the guide easier to read.
- Keep the paragraphs and descriptions short.
- Never assume that the reader is familiar with the product. Write each guide as if they've never seen one before.
- Lengthy, complex paragraphs and pages are okay for technical manuals but inappropriate for simple user guides. Keep it short and sweet.