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11. Handbook Basics

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A *handbook*, as we are defining it here, is a combination of concept, instruction, and reference information focused on a specific topic for a specific audience's needs.

Handbook Basics

Concepts

Conceptual information explains how things work, how things are put together. For more complex instructions, you have to know some concepts, theory, background, and principles to perform the instructions. Consider the example of the software function that enables you to modify or create your own color. Using something like Photoshop, Illustration, CorelDraw or Paint Shop Pro to do this—the actual buttons and sliders— is easy. But understanding how hue, intensity, brightness, saturation, density, contrast, and RGB work—that's hard. You have to know computer color theory to create the color you need.

Consider another example: simple Linux file system commands—ls, cd, cp, mv, pwd. To use these commands, you need to understand what files and directories are, and probably what an operating system is as well as wildcards. You really can't understand how to use these commands—follow instructions using them—unless you understand these basic concepts.

Instructions

If you do understand the fundamental concepts, then you can intelligently follow the step-by-step procedures. Instructions are those familiar numbered-list things that carefully walk you through a procedure. Instructions are everywhere, on product packaging, in user guides that come with appliances, and on computers.

Reference

The last category of information involves look-up information, or quick-reference information. If you followed the file system example above, you had to study and learn the concepts of files, directory, and wildcards first. Then you could follow and understand the instructions on changing directories, copying, deleting, or moving files. After a while though you no longer need the instructions, but now and then you have special requirements not covered in the instruction section or you can't remember certain procedures that were covered in the instruction section. Now's the time you need basic reference information: you just go to that section and quickly look it up.

And so after more time, you no longer need the concepts section and the instructions section: you gotten so accustomed to those procedures, you know them by heart. But now and then you forget some little detail or you have some special task you've never done before —that's when you go to the reference section. You could probably tear off the concepts and instructions sections and throw them away. All you'll ever need is the

reference section.

Handbook Format and Style

In creating a handbook, you should adhere to rather specific guidelines for the use of headings, lists, notices, graphics, tables, documentation, and introductions—which of course assumes that you must use these things:

Handbook prototype

From the link below you can get a dummy version of the handbook. It includes all the required pages in good format. Included in this Word document are paragraph and character styles that will make your work easier and add some professional skills to your repertoire.

Handbook prototype

Contents prototype

The prototype for the table of contents is particularly useful: it gives you the Word styles to produce a professional-looking TOC. It is tough to get the left- and right-alignments and leader dots right.

Table of contents prototype

Actually, these same prototypes can be used for any formal report.