



Technical Writing for an International Audience

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About Me

Tanja Roth

technical writer for + 15 years

mechanical engineering, medical technology,
information technology

joined SUSE in 2005

plays drums and percussion

organizes community drum circles

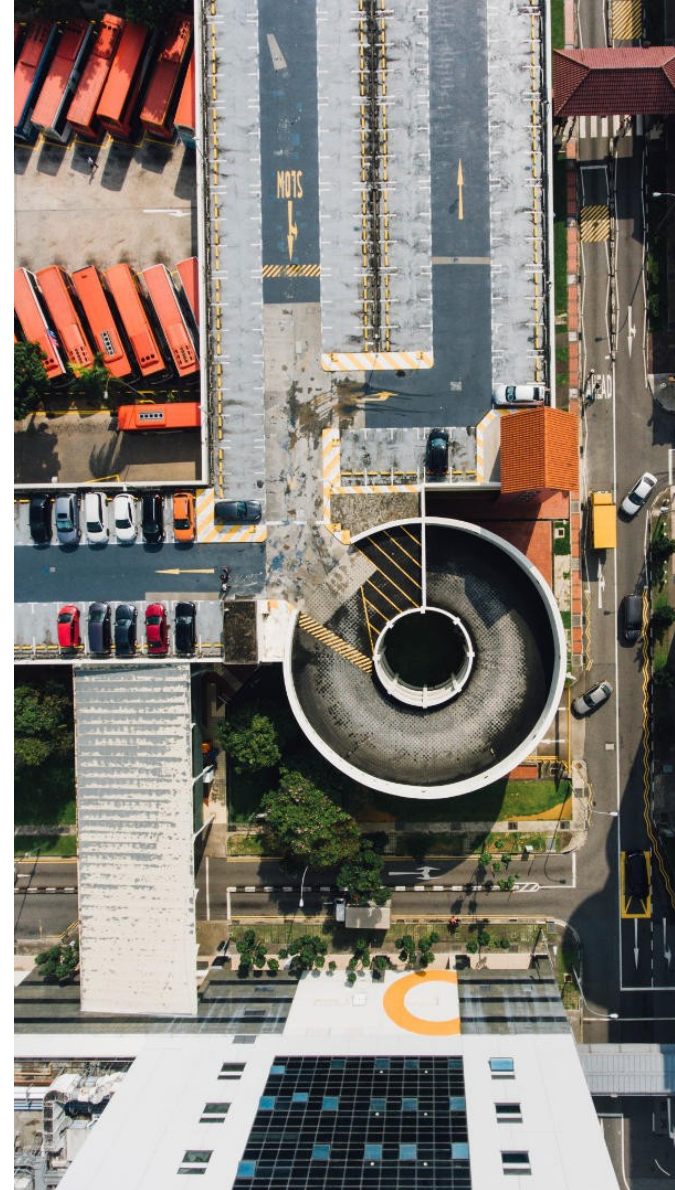


Photos: private



Overview

1. Principles
2. Best Practices
3. Exercise:
Analyzing & Optimizing a Text



Principles

Principles

#1 Change Perspective

step into your audience's shoes



Principles

#2 Make it Easy to...

process information

follow instructions

remember information



Principles

#3 Consider the Reading Situation

frustration

little time

noisy environment

non-native speakers of English



Principles

Conclusion

obey KISS (“keep it short and simple”)

short sentences, simple grammar, simple words



Best Practices

Writing

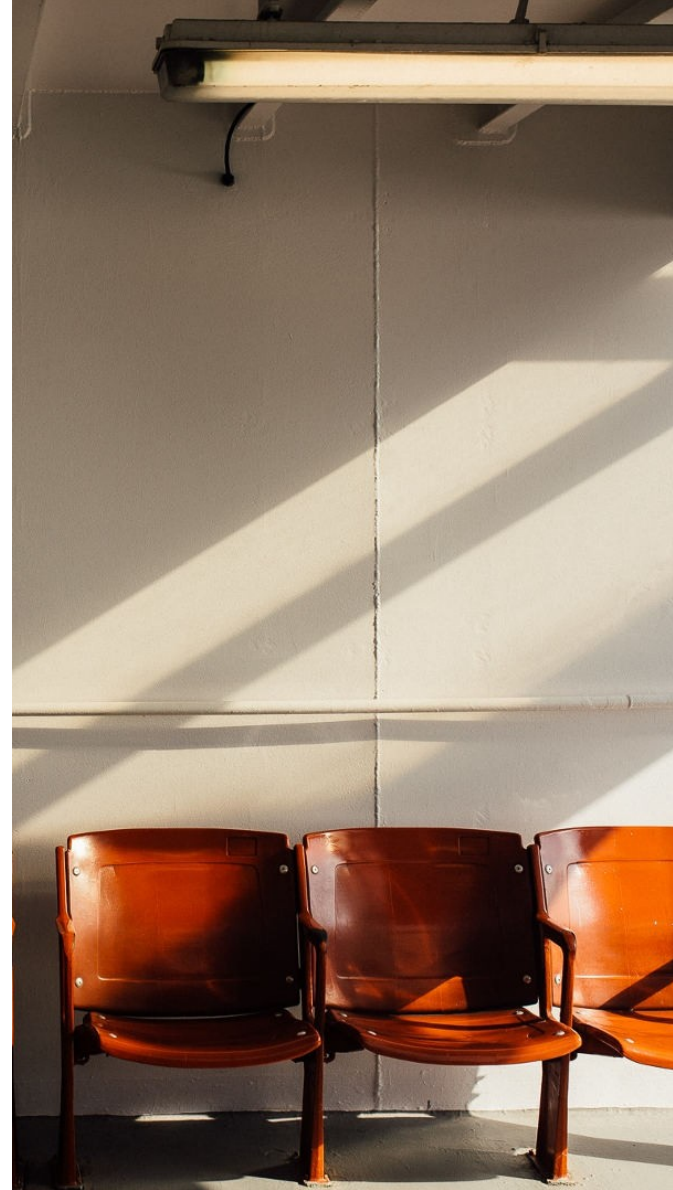
Target Audience & Purpose

know your audience

- level of detail
- involve readers: “you”

form follows function

- what is the purpose of a word/sentence/paragraph/section?
- is it an instruction, a description, a warning?



Writing

Information Types: *Descriptive* vs. *Task-Based*

descriptive: basic information, concepts, reference

task-based: how do I achieve my goal?

most documentation needs both

for orientation, clearly separate the types (titles, layout)

Writing

Consistency

choice of words

spelling and punctuation

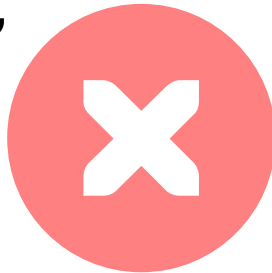
phrases and structure

brevity

Writing

Example: “Empty Calories”

“An effective business requirements analysis should be performed to determine the right level of security and hardening to be applied to a server or defined as part of a baseline server build.”



“To find the right level of security and hardening for a server, analyze your business requirements.”



Structure

A Recipe

1. *intro*: invite the reader in
2. *brief background*: state the issue
3. *sharing the news*: name the solution
4. *getting technical*: solve the issue
5. *conclusion*: important facts, next steps



Structure

Example: “Flat Tire”

intro

If you are a car driver, you might have found yourself in the following situation:

background

You are stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire.

sharing the news

As no help is in sight, you need to change the tire yourself:

1. Apply the hand brake and put the car into a parking position.
2. Place a heavy object in front of the tires.
3. Take out the spare tire and the jack. [...]

getting technical

After you have successfully installed the new tire, put the old tire in the trunk and take it to a mechanic.

conclusion

Structure

Modes of Text Consumption

reading cover to cover

skimming

browsing

searching (tables, indexes, full-text)



Structure

Perspective of the Reader

complex information

- split into chunks
- *Miller's Law*: 7 ± 2 items

task analysis

- focus on goals
- does structure reflect the user's goals?



Structure

Order & Hierarchy

first things first: what all users need to know (early)

4.1 Managing User Accounts

4.2 Enforcing Password Policies

4.3 Managing Quotas

flat hierarchies

- 3 levels: 1. – 1.1 – 1.1.1
- be pragmatic, not scientific
- avoid *lonely sections*: 1. – 1.1 – 2. – 2.1 – 2.2



Phrasing Titles

content of the section

information type of the section

- *descriptive*: nouns, example: “Types of Frobnicators”
- *task-based*: verbs, example: “Installing Frobnicator”

distinctive information first

- ~~“How to Install Frobnicator”~~
- “Installing Frobnicator”
- ~~“Frobnicator Setup”~~
- “Setting Up Frobnicator”

Phrasing

Sentences

rule of thumb: one sentence, one idea

first things first

- ~~“The PIN, which must not be noted on the credit card, consists of 4 digits.”~~
- “The PIN consists of 4 digits. Do not note the PIN on the credit card.”

instructions: where to act? what to do?

- ~~“Search for ‘foo bar’ in /etc/hosts.”~~
- “In /etc/hosts, search for ‘foo bar’.”

Phrasing

Avoid Interruptions

move particles to the beginning or the end

“however”, “nevertheless”, “therefore”, “for example”, “if necessary”...

- ~~“They are not, however, marked as installed.”~~
- “However, they are not marked as installed.”

same goes for long commands

keep together phrasal verbs

- ~~“You can shut the server down.”~~
- “You can shut down the server.”

Phrasing

Avoid Ambiguities

accumulations of nouns

- ~~“Clone Resource Agent Requirements”~~
- “Requirements for Clone Resource Agents”
- *“*Cloning Resource Agent Requirements”*

what are gerunds (-ing) referring to?

- ~~“Encrypt the password using grub2-mkpasswd-pbkdf2.”~~
- “Encrypt the password by using grub2-mkpasswd-pbkdf2.”
- *“*Encrypt the password that uses grub2-mkpasswd-pbkdf2.”*

Phrasing

Tenses

use present tense as often as possible

use the simplest tense that is appropriate

- ~~“Click 'Print'. The 'Printer Options' dialog will appear.”~~
- “Click 'Print'. The 'Printer Options' dialog appears.”
- ~~“After you installed your system, configure it.”~~
- “After you install your system, configure it.”

Phrasing

Use Simple Words

~~“utilize”~~

“use”

~~“indicate”~~

“show” “tell” “say”

~~“prerequisite”~~

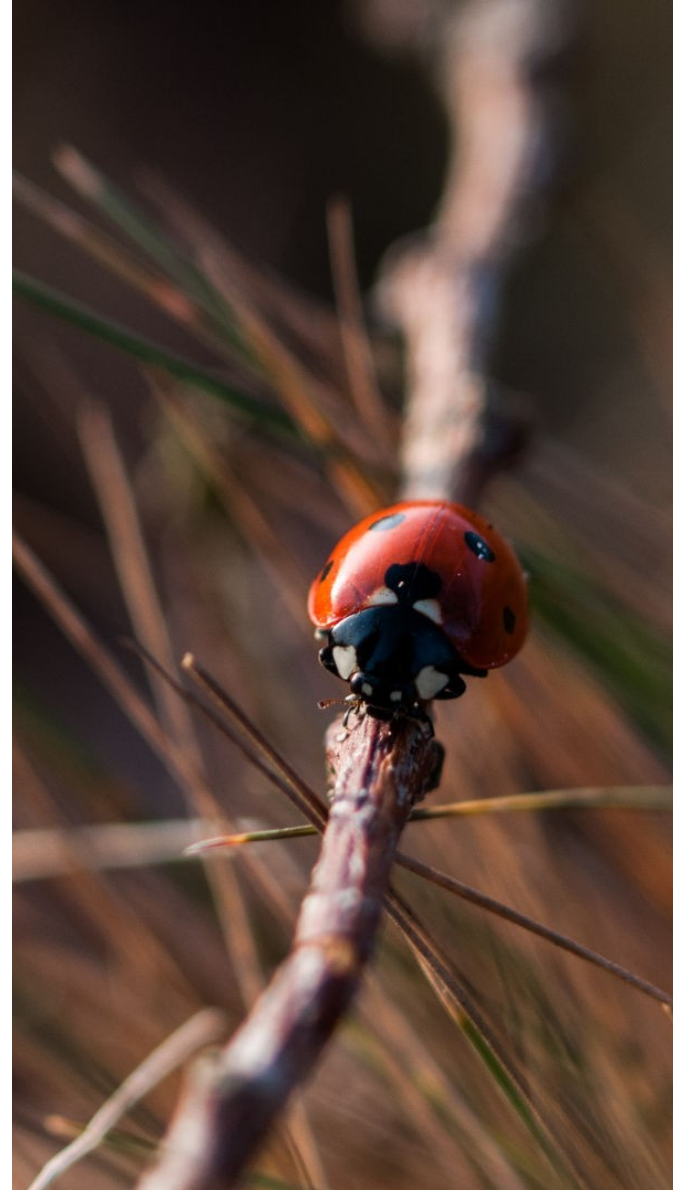
“requirement”

~~“is able to”~~

“can”

~~“in order to”~~

“to”



Phrasing

Avoid Filler

filler words

- “basically,” “essentially,” “simple,” “just,” “easily”

unnecessary modification

- “several different types” “already existing” “completely new”

Lists

Parallelism

grammatical constructions, punctuation

“Why white space is important:

- ~~Attention focus~~
- ~~It visually separates sections.~~
- ~~Breaking content into chunks”~~

“Why white space is important:

- It focuses attention.
- It visually separates sections.
- It breaks content into chunks.”



Lists

Easy to Translate

introduce with a full sentence

- To deploy Frobnicator, ~~you need to~~:
 - install ...
 - configure ...
- To deploy Frobnicator, you need to perform the following tasks:
 - Install ...
 - Configure ...

Giving Instructions

Going Step by Step

structure:

1. name goal
2. name requirements
3. use list of steps (correctly ordered!)

7-10 steps (or split into multiple procedures)

active voice for actions:

- ~~"The system is configured by ..."~~
- "Configure the system ..."

backgrounds and concepts: before the procedure!



Warnings & Tips

Safety Dance

add warning *before* the step or action where danger arises

ANSI Z535 American standard:

1. signal word
2. type and source of danger
3. possible consequences
4. how to avoid



Warning: Loss of Data

Installing SUSE Manager on a physical machine will erase any data on the hard disk that is used for installation.

Before starting the installation, create a backup of your hard disks.

Text and Images

Cultural-specific Information

format of dates: 06/10/2017 → 6 Oct. 2017? 10 June 2017?

terms like “domestic”, “foreign”, “billion”, “trillion”

colors and their connotations

directional references (“left”, “right”) in bi-directional languages

Best Practices Summary

3 principles

best practices

- writing
- structure
- phrasing
- lists
- instructions
- warnings



Exercise: Analyzing and Optimizing a Text

Exercise

Analyzing and Optimizing a Text

<https://git.io/osse-tw-example-1>



tasks:

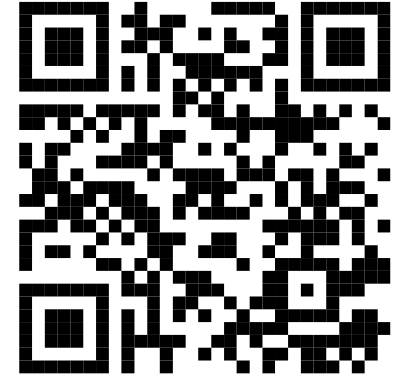
1. **identify functions of snippets** (descriptions, requirements, individual steps, warnings, results, goals)
2. **identify problems** (structure? titles? sentences? words? procedures? warnings?)
3. rewrite and try to optimize

Exercise

Possible Solution

many ways to optimize! example solution:

<https://git.io/osse-tw-solution-1>



“If I had more time,
I would have written a shorter letter.”

– attributed to H.D. Thoreau, Voltaire, Augustin,
Mark Twain, Blaise Pascal

Sources



Link to source listing: <https://git.io/osse-tw-sources>

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