

---

# Minimalist Writing

PowerPoint text from the presentation by Mary Ann Howell, Hikari Publishing

## What I'm not going to do:

- Teach anyone how to write-- you learn by doing

You can't learn to write by listening to someone talk, anymore than you can learn to play a piano by listening to someone talk.

- Hire an editor, take a class, attend a hands-on seminar.
- Find out which local colleges are teaching what when and where.
- Attend STC seminars!
- Take up self-paced tutorials.
- Read good writing-- if you train your ear you'll know when your writing is tight.

## What I'm not going to do (more):

- Show you how to save your time.

It takes longer to write shorter.

But you will save a lot of other people's time:

- expert reviewers
- editors
- duplicated efforts
- your users!

## What I am going to do

- Define some of the simplified language movements
- Explain in seven steps how to cut your documentation to a minimum

---

## What I hope you'll contribute

- Edits
- Tips
- Other Good Sources
- Stories From The Trenches

## What is minimalist writing (or what this presentation isn't)

The Nurnberg Funnel: Designing Minimalist Instruction for Practical Computer Skill

By John Carroll, 1991 (Ph.D in experimental Psychology, Columbia University, now head of Center for Human -Computer Interaction at Virginia Tech)

Minimalists are fond of the word **heuristics**:

- 1 A speculative formulation used as a guide in investigation or problem solving.
- 2 Educational method in which learning takes place through discoveries made by the student.

(The American Heritage Dictionary)

## Gist of it

Documentation usually uses a “systems” approach, that actually impedes learners.

The systematic approach defines the structure of a flow of tasks that are taught and then drilled.

The structure is too rigid and can conflict with individual learning styles, because “many learners do not follow instructions willingly or well.”

The most efficient way learn tasks is to do tasks, not read explanatory text. Always keep in mind the learner's motivation is not to learn the tool, but to accomplish a task using the tool. Learning the tool is a means to an end, not the end itself.

---

## Principles:

- Get learners doing real work ASP
- Minimize overview--provide only what is needed to learn the task, and maybe put it last.
- Set up an environment for exploratory leaning by trial and error.
- Provide good error recovery information.
- procedures should be modular, and usable in any order.

Carroll focuses on training material for novice users of software such as WordPerfect.

## Other writing isims

There are several approaches to write documentation that is clear, concise, and easily used.

- Plain English, Plain Language

A crusade carried out in the US, Canada, England, and Australia to write clear, concise documents that are logically organized. Especially active in government sectors. Joseph Kimble, a law professor at Thomas Cooley Law School, is the principle advocate in the United States for using plain language in legal documentation.

There is a interesting article on plain language in this quarter's issue of STC Technical Communication (Volume 48, Number 3).

## Other writing isims (more)

- Simplified English

A system used by many companies involved with aviation. It consists of a set of guidelines developed by the European Association of Aerospace Industries (AECMA) for writing documentation supporting aircraft maintenance. Simplified English guidelines include:

- Simple syntax.
- A limited number of words (lists are provided).
- A limited number of clearly defined meanings for these words- in general, each word has only one meaning.
- A limited number of parts of speech for the words--in general, each word has only one part of speech.

## Other writing isims (more)

- Controlled Language
  - Designed to make translation faster and more accurate.
  - Uses one set of terms for a technology.

## Seven steps to minimalist writing

- 1 Analyze the user's goals.
- 2 Design the document to support the user.
- 3 Write once and use everywhere.
- 4 Write transparently.
- 5 Edit.
- 6 Test.
- 7 Rinse and repeat.

## 1 Analyze the user's goals

Know your user

- Know what they know already.
- Know what he or she expects and wants to do.
- Know about any prerequisites they need.
  - Knowledge
  - Setup
  - Earlier tasks completed

Marketing should have answers to these questions.

But customer support will probably be the ones with the real answers.

## 2 Design the information to support the user

- Your information products should be consistent, with:
  - The same types of information,
  - In the same order,
  - In the same style.
- Use information models and keep an architectural style guide:  
List what types of information are needed
  - Where they go
  - And in what order
- For example, headings are key to organizing and finding information. Define heading styles for different types of information, for instance:
  - Overview info: Use **nouns**: *The Process Program*
  - Strategy info for a procedure: Use **gerunds**: *Creating a Process Program*
  - The steps of the procedure: Use **To**: *To Create a Process Program*Each heading should be a unique title, no duplicates!
- Give only the overview and explanatory text the users really need
- Layer information for different users
- Write the procedures in the order they're usually done
- But set up the procedures so they can stand on their own
- If there is more than one way do the same thing, explain only one.  
If they can find a command from the file menu or right click and choose it from a shortcut menu, just tell them about the shortcut menu.

## 3 Write once and use again

If you use the same chunk of information in many places, write it once and reuse it.

## 4 Write transparently

- Write sentences that your reader can read once and understand.
- Keep them simple.
- Write as though you are talking to a friend.
- Trim all fat.
- Use the active voice, find the true subject and the true verb:
  - The occurrence of the illuminated failure indicator can be caused by several different problems.
  - Different problems can light the failure indicator.
- Remove adjectives:
  - The results are applicable only to the final example.
  - The results apply only to the final example.
- Remove redundancies:
  - The basic fundamentals are simple.
  - The fundamentals are simple.
- Find one word:
  - In the unlikely possibility that
  - If
- Remove or re-phrase prepositions and prepositional phrases:
  - You should free up the spindle before spinning.
  - Free the spindle before spinning.
- Use a prefix (but don't make one up):
  - If you don't spell the word correctly
  - If you misspell the word

- Use a shorter word:
  - Oil the blunkard to facilitate removal.
  - Oil the blunkard to ease removal.
- Remove or rephrase adverbs:
  - Tighten the screw thoroughly.
  - Tighten the screw.
- Don't use simply or utilize:  
Please don't.
- Don't cut out your the's and a's, (they will have to read it twice):
  - Pull lever.
  - Pull the lever.
- Draw the information instead and use callouts:
- Use flow charts:

## 5 Edit

- You edit.
- Read it out loud and edit again.
- Let someone else edit.
  - Say thank you (not yeah but).
  - Make the changes.

## How to edit someone else's work

- 1 Read the story while you sit on your hands. (Get the information, purpose, and style before you get out the red pen. Put your red pen in a drawer across the room.)
- 2 Edit the story thoroughly. Check:
  - Is the information complete? (check for holes)
  - Is it well organized (correct inconsistencies)
  - Is the story clear? (correct, trim, and polish)
  - Is it accurate? (check numbers, specifications)
  - Is it tightly written (trim unnecessary words and information)
- 3 Check graphics and their callouts.
- 4 Find things you like and write an admiring note.
- 5 Re-read the story and check your work.

## 6 Test your procedures

- You test.
- Someone else hanging around can test: application engineers, customer support, UPS man.
- Users test: get hitched up by sales or customer support.
- Study problems and errors that are made, adjust your procedures.

## 7 Repeat until it is yanked from your hands!