

Writing a User Guide

Common CS Technical Documents

Emails (Newsgroup/Forum/Blog Posts)

Code Comments

Software User Guides

Presentations

Project Plans

Software Requirement Specifications (SRS)

Research Papers

Posters

The project: a user guide

You'll need to write a user guide for the project.

User Guides

The purpose of a User Guide is to allow users to install, use and troubleshoot a piece of software.

Some questions to think of when writing a user guide:

Who is your audience, who are your users?

Are there different groups of users?

What level of technical expertise do they have?

How much time will they invest reading the user guide?

Where will they read the user guide?

Is this product an upgrade to an existing product?

What tasks are users typically going to perform with the software?

Will different groups of users perform different tasks?

User Guides

There are many online guides aimed at helping writers prepare user guides (see reference list)

Generally, User Guides employ the following style elements:

Headings and Lists: help the user find information quickly

Special Notices: warnings, cautions or alerts, to alert readers to important points

Instructional Design: task-oriented headings, tasks in numbered lists (step 1, step 2...), “chunking” together related tasks

Graphics: screenshots and pictures, before and after views

Tables: present details in an easy-to-access form, good for look-up information like OS types or minimum system requirements

Highlighting: can be useful if used consistently and sparingly

Components of a User Guide

Front and back covers	Title page	Edition number
Trademarks	Disclaimers	Warranties
License agreements	Safety notices	Preface
Appendices	Glossary	Table of contents
Instructions/ Procedures/Tasks	Getting started/ Quick start guide	System requirements
Reference information	Troubleshooting section	FAQ
Contact Information	Index	

Tips on Content

Use direct commands to the user.

“Click this”; and “you”, not “the user”.

Supply a real manual: most users do not bother to open pdfs.

Explain the problem being solved: do not just include a detailed description of features, but explain why users would want to use these features.

Present the concepts, not just the features: if users understand the underlying concept of the software, they will more easily understand the features

Give them more: manuals can cover the task domain, not just the software

Make it enjoyable to read (but keep it professional):

“Your Mac's software is the result of an accidental collaboration among hundreds of programmers.” [David Pogue's introduction, in the Conflict Catcher 8 manual]

Tips on the Writing Process

Ensure the writers are part of the software design team.

Write the user manual while you are developing the software.

Do not try to write it quickly before a release deadline.

Make sure the writers have access to the software, have used the software, and are using the software as they write.

Consider the needs of disabled users.

low vision, color blindness, loss of acuity

Your boss can't see as well as you can.

User test the product and the user guide with real users.

Activity I: Writing a User Guide

We will write a partial short User Guide for a simple application.

Try to decide which components are or are not necessary for your guide

Come up with an outline.

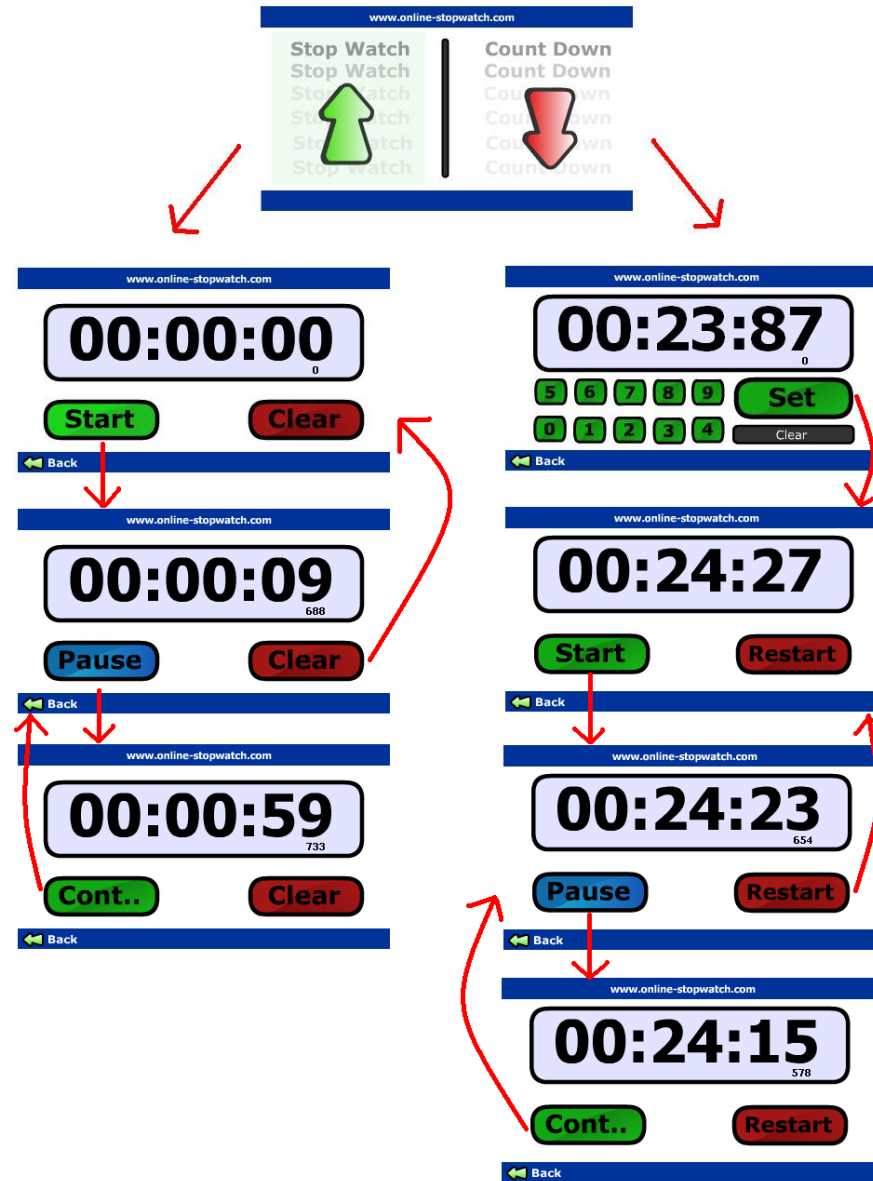
Max length: 2 pages (1 page double sided)

Time: 10 minutes

Try to describe one or two example features/functionality.

Don't worry if you don't complete the guide.

The Application: An Online Stopwatch



Activity 2: Critiquing a User Guide

Give your User Guide to someone else, and get someone else's User Guide.

Spend 5 minutes making both positive and negative comments on the Guide.

Is it missing important information?

Are the instructions clear?

Would they be understandable for a non-technical user?

5-10 minutes discussion

References

Online Technical Writing: User Guides

http://www.io.com/~hcexres/textbook/user_guides.html

User Guide Tutorial

<http://www.klariti.com/technical-writing/User-Guides-Tutorial.shtml>

User Guide – Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_guide

Tips for Writing User Manuals

<http://www.userfocus.co.uk/articles/usermanuals.html>

How to Publish a Great User Manual

<http://www.asktog.com/columns/017ManualWriting.html>