

# Writing Style

What to do and what not to do  
When writing for the Manual

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# Agenda

Writing a manual

Our audience

Our voice

Conventions



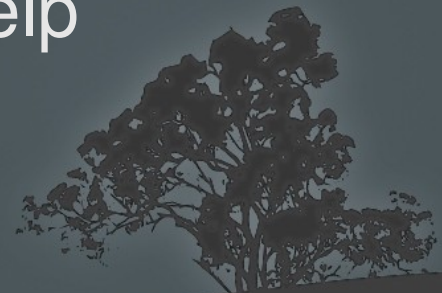
# Writing a Manual: Challenges

- Content decisions
  - What to include, what to leave out
- Style decisions
  - Grammar rules
  - Voice rules
- Understanding the audience
  - How to present the information
- Practical Limitations
  - Length, completeness, file size, etc.



# Writing Challenges: Other Sources

- Everything we cover is already documented
- Many other sources
  - Ubuntu documentation
  - GNOME documentation
  - Community and user documentation and guides
- Problems
  - Task-based versus guided help
  - Licensing is incompatible
  - Technical level is too high



# Our Audience: New Users

- People who are new to Linux and Ubuntu
- May be new computer users
- Assume basic keyboard and mouse skills, concept of a modern GUI with overlapping windows
- Do not know other terms
  - computer vs. monitor
  - ethernet vs. wifi
  - IMAP vs. POP
  - sudo vs. root



# Our Audience: New Users

- Do not use any technical jargon
- Define or explain everything more difficult than clicking the mouse button
- Be very precise in your language to make sure the user knows what you are describing
  - Know UI widget names and actions
- Start with the simple, end with the advanced



# Our Audience: Eager To Learn

- Interested in learning
- Task oriented, wants to know how to:
  - Browse the web
  - Scan a document
  - Edit spreadsheets
  - Keep the system up to date
- May read the manual in large chunks, not purely as a reference work but as a book



# Our Audience: Eager to Learn

- Keep a narrative that turns a novice into a knowledgeable user
- Think in terms of user tasks, not technology
  - Each documented action should be attributed to a potential user desire
- Use asides and margins to inform users about advanced topics, or how to learn more
- Do not patronize





# Our Audience: International

- Core language for the manual is English...
  - ...but we're translating into tens of other languages
- Even for the English version, need to assume an international audience
  - Some may not have English as their first language, and may not be fluent in it
- Idioms, humor, complex vocabulary will cause problems



# Our Audience: International

- Use very, very simple language
- Always use a simpler synonym
- Repeat yourself
  - In Ubuntu, you can do X with Y. To do X, ...
- Use short paragraphs with a few sentences in each one
- All English-language documentation for Ubuntu uses American spelling



# Our Voice: Confident

- Our users expect us to be experts on Ubuntu
- In writing, we need to be confident of our opinions
  - Wrong: 'Ubuntu is reasonably secure'
  - Correct: 'Ubuntu is a secure operating system'
- But we shouldn't claim to be prescient
  - Worse: 'Ubuntu will open a window'
  - Better: 'Ubuntu should open a window'



# Our Voice: Direct and Calm

- Write as if you are having a conversation with the reader
  - Wrong: “Those with Gmail accounts can...”
  - Correct: “If you have a Gmail account, you can...”
- Avoid superlatives and marketing speak
  - “Ubuntu is the best at...”
  - “The easiest way...”
  - “Ubuntu is excellent at...”



# Our Voice: Slightly Opinionated

- There is always more than one way to do it
- But we should only recommend one or two
  - Consistency with official documentation
  - Don't mention other options unless they are actually *better*, not just because they exist
  - OK to have both mouse & keyboard directions
- Try to steer users away from bad decisions, but do not preach
  - provide reasons why something is a good idea



# Our Voice: Aligned with Users

- Think of how users will want to use what you are describing
  - Title each section with a verb in gerund form
    - “Customizing the desktop”, “Scanning images”, “Securing your network connection” etc.
- Guide them from justifying the need to completing the task
  - Start with *why they may want to do it*, and give detailed steps until you lead them to the end



# Conventions: Attribution

- Policy is to use Ubuntu, not Linux, in copy
  - Anything else will confuse users
- Attribute desktop actions to Ubuntu, application actions to the application
  - “Ubuntu will open the help window...”
  - “Empathy will open a window...”
- Ensure active voice
  - Good: “Empathy will open a window...”
  - Bad: “A window will be opened by Empathy”

# Conventions: Standard GUI Terms

- button
  - Click OK, Cancel, other common buttons
  - Click on other buttons
- check box
  - Two words
  - Choose, or select/deselect
  - A check box is either selected or unselected
  - Can also write “option” instead of “check box”





# Conventions: Standard GUI Terms

- dialog
  - Not “dialog box”
  - The name of the dialog is its title
- drop-down list
  - One that does not let you type
  - **Use** the *name* drop-down list to **specify**
- drop-down combination list
  - One that lets you type
  - Not “combo box”



# Conventions: Standard GUI Terms

- double-click
  - Spell with a dash
  - double-click on something
- drag
  - Do not use “drag and drop”
  - drag something to some place



# Conventions: Standard GUI Terms

- field
  - Enter information in the name field
- list box
  - Select or choose
- Main Menu
  - The GNOME desktop's main menu
- menubar
  - One word, not two
  - Choose from a menubar



# Conventions: Standard GUI Terms

- Log in, log out, shut down
  - Two words for actions
- Login, shutdown
  - One word for nouns/adjectives
- popup menu
  - Not “pop-up”
- radio button
  - Use “option” instead
  - Choose or select



# Conventions: Standard GUI Terms

- scrollbar, statusbar, titlebar, toolbar
  - One word
- tab
  - Click on a tab
- text box
  - Use the text box to specify

