

Writing How-To's

People tend to use documentation in three ways. First, to get started. Some people don't know how to "open it", "install it", or "play the game." You need documentation to get started. Second, you need help when you have a specific question that can't be answered through experimentation. Third, you need help in applying the skills to new activities and projects.

Writing Step-by-Step Instructions

Regardless of whether you're working with children or adults, there are many things to consider when writing step-by-step instruction. What's their reading level? What is their experience with computers? What specifically do you want your learner to do with the software? How can you provide the most independent environment for your learner? The following tips are helpful for children, but they are also helpful for anyone learning to use a new software package.

Step-by-Step Instruction. Provide very specific step-by-step instructions. It's helpful to provide an action followed by a description of what the user should see or a common troubleshooting problem. Examine the instructions for printing. Notice that the action is in bold.

To print:

Pull down the File menu.
A dialog box will appear.
Click OK.

Lists. Some developers like to number their steps. This helps students keep track of where they are in the process. Notice that PLAY and START are in caps because that's the way they appear on the screen. You could even include a small picture of the icon in your documentation.

Running the Simulation

1. Click on the PLAY icon.
2. Check your level on your handout.
3. Click on your level.
4. Click START.

Icons. Use icons to represent particular types of activities. For example, in this website there are logos for Connection Starters and Skills-Building Activities. You could use an icon to distinguish things to read vs things to do or to highlight definitions or key points. In the example, a light bulb is used when learners need to make a decision or check something.



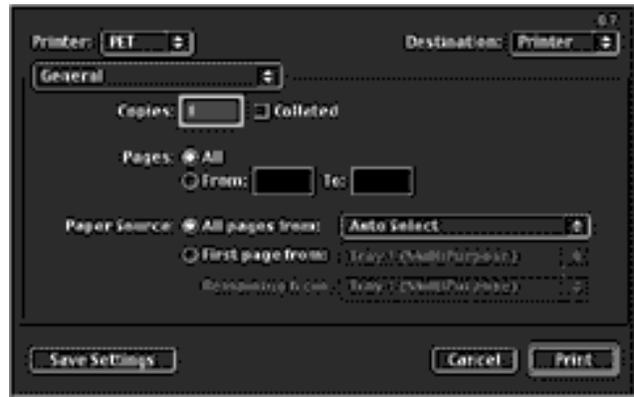
CheckPoint

Before deleting the old version, be sure that your new version works correctly.

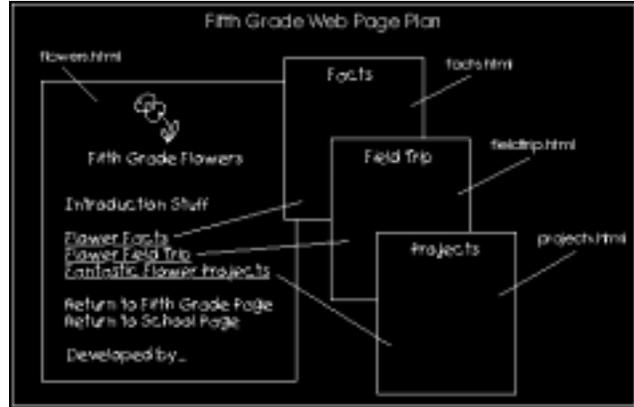
Fonts. Use fonts, type sizes, and styles for particular purposes. Keep track of these on a style sheet. For instance, highlighted words might be found in a glossary. In the example above, the question is in bold.

A **web browser** is used to view web pages found on the Internet.

Screen Dumps. Screen dumps help the user become oriented. They need to see what will happen when the mouse is clicked or an action that is taken. For many new users, the screens are reassuring. They let the user know that they are in the correct place. Screen dumps are also important for learners who depend on the visuals for added information. The screen dump shows print options. Use arrows and circles to highlight specific areas.



Illustrations. Besides screen dumps there are other types of visuals that might be helpful. Many learners like a visual overview of the software package such as a diagram or map that shows the main parts of the program. You could also label an introductory screen or the menu selections. This is particularly helpful on a very visual software package.



Checklists. Use checklists to help students troubleshoot problems or evaluate their progress. Use dingbats such as boxes and checkmarks at the beginning of lists.

- Turn on the computer.
- Double-click on the Math Magic icon.
- Click on the Hat icon.

Q&A/FAQs. Use Questions and Answers (Q&A) or Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) as a way for people to solve common problems. State the question or problem in bold, then answer the question below.

What's a URL?
 URL stands for Universal Resources Locator. It's the web address. For example, the URL for CNN Interactive is <http://cnn.com>

Samples. Sample products can often be helpful. For example, if students are making a "story", "book", or "banner," print out a sample so they can see what the output will look like. If students are creating a spreadsheet, show a final product. You can also follow a sample search or model product during your step-by-step instructions to help students learn to use the software. It's nice if the sample is student-generated. For example, the butterfly below was created by a first grader.



Print Publishing

Your final published document should be attractive and easy to use. Consider the following elements.

Paper. When printing in color, choose a good-quality white paper. When printing in black and white, consider color-coding your directions. Use black lettering against a pastel colored paper. Remember, you can also use linked stationary to add pizzazz to a project.

Page Orientation. You don't need to lay out all documents the traditional way. Consider folded fliers or horizontal booklets.

Color. Color is a nice addition to documentation. It can add interest and helps users see the actual screen colors. Color is practical when developing notebooks of information. It may be impractical when duplicating pages for an entire class.

Notebooks. Use plastic sleeves and notebooks for an appealing documentation layout. You might also use plastic folders for storage.

Booklet. When designing materials for children, develop a booklet that students can use to follow the procedures and also record their findings. They might draw a picture, answer a question, write a story, or create a timeline. For example, your booklet might provide directions for using Netscape and going to a particular web page, then ask students to answer questions about the content at that site.