Writing with Users in Mind
Theory and Experiences

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Outline

Introduction
Nothing to see here, move on

This talk...

- is about writing in general
- is geared towards technical manuals (our handbooks)
- includes some examples as horror effects
- is not intended to proclaim a "universal truth"
- gives a view of my own experiences

Outline

Decisions
Start thinking about...

Three important questions

- Who?
- What?
- How?

Who?
For whom?

Your users, obviously

- ... wait, who are your users?
- Beginners?
- Field experts?
- With or without pc knowledge?

This influences...

- The language you can use (jargon, terminology)
- The way to explain things (pictures, lists, running text)

What?
About what?

Your pet application, obviously

- ... wait, what is your pet application?
- Users tend to misuse applications
- Make sure that you get its purpose right
- What are its key uses?
- What are its key concepts?

How?
In which way?

The Right Way^{TM}, obviously

- From left to right (following the UI)
- From the inside out (take a functionality and list different ways to use it)
- As-the-ox-goes (a typical workflow)
- And of course you can combine.

Outline

Examples to follow
Though sometimes you need imagination

Lots of rules to help you on your way

- UI naming guidelines
- Style guide
- Docbook structure template
- ... but not for content
- ... why not?

Examples to follow?
You definitely need imagination

A surprisingly simple answer

- Each handbook is different
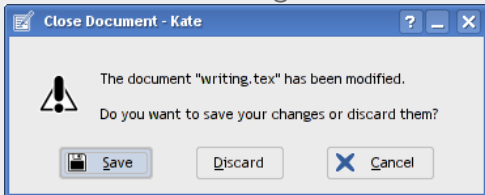- Your creativity, your handbook

Golden Rules

Golden rule #1: Golden rules are good

Choose clarity

- Clear, short sentences
- Don't overdo it though...

- You may assume a general knowledge level
- Structure never hurt anyone.
- K.I.S.S.

If at first you don't succeed...
Try, and try again

If at first you do succeed...

Try, and try again

- Reread.
- Find people to proofread for you
  - Native speakers
  - Non-native speakers
  - Actual users
  - Prospective users
- A sentence isn't finished when it's written.

Examples
Experiences from the real world

If, then, as long as...

The combination of width/height and resolution determines how big your image will be on screen or on paper: if your image has a resolution of 100x100 dpi, and your image is 1000x1000 pixels big, then, if everything is configured correctly, your image will be exactly 10 inches long and 10 inches wide if you check with a ruler, no matter the resolution of your screen or of your printer — if shown at 100%.

Examples
Experiences from the real world

Define "normal"

To close a window, use the normal window closing button.

Examples
Experiences from the real world

Logic?

You can paint on it with greyscale colors: the more black the color, the less the layer under it will shine through, the more white, the less the layer under it will be shown. So complete white will let nothing through, complete black will let everything through.

Examples
Experiences from the real world

Unclarity by repeated double redundancy

In some cases it is easier to specify your selection the other way around. That is, first you select the parts that ultimately should not be selected and then then you choose Select→Invert. What invert does, is that for every pixel it flips the selection level so to speak, by setting it to 256 minus the current selection level. Thus what was selected becomes unselected and vice versa.

Outline

More things to think about
Or even do...

More ways to improve your handbook

- Look at user interaction
- Use pictures
- Reread, reread, rewrite, rewrite
- Enjoy it

More things to think about
Or even do...

User interaction and program usability

- How do users understand, and use, the program?
- Program design says something about intended functionality
  - Toolbar buttons → "click-result-done"
  - Menu options and dialogs → more complex tasks
- Your handbook should fit in

Now it's your turn

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