15 tips for writing great Help files

cherryleaf

www.cherryleaf.com

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We asked the Technical Authors at Cherryleaf (http://www.cherryleaf.com) for tips on writing Help files. These are their top 15 tips:

1. Think about what your audience needs/wants. Talk to your users. Find out what your users struggle with, what they already know, what kinds of information they crave, what tasks they perform most frequently, what vocabulary they use, what they are doing before, during and after using the system.

2. If you can't talk to your users, talk to your Help Desk and Training departments.

3. Plan your Table of Contents before you start writing.

4. Structure the Table of Contents so that your users will find it easy to navigate. Don't bury topics too deep - the user will never find them.

5. Write to a level of detail that is appropriate for your audience. Where possible, keep your topics short and to the point.

6. Name your topics sensibly, so that a user can look at them and know what information they'll find within a particular topic. "General information" or "Miscellaneous" are no use to anyone.

7. Have just one procedure per topic.

8. Address your instructions directly to the user - avoid the passive voice.

9. Don't mix conceptual information with instructional information.

10. Use a style sheet for consistency. You can often use it again as a base for other projects, thus saving you time.

11. Use popups / expanding text / drop-down text to hide any information that will be optional for the user.

12. Avoid using indentation to indicate sub-sections. Use vertical white space instead.

13. Spend time on the index, as many users will look for topics here.

14. Include synonyms in your index.

15. Avoid use of large screen-captures. Instead, clip the image to show only the part being described.

About Cherryleaf

Cherryleaf Limited has locations in Birmingham, Brighton, Heathrow (London) and Thame, although we carry out work throughout the UK and the rest of Europe.
We explain things. We work with:

- Developers of software who are afraid of losing their customers and frustrated with the cost of supporting them.
- Anyone who needs to create straightforward, easy to use information and get it to the people who need it.
- Developers of software who lack the time and resource to document their systems adequately.
- Companies who need help organising, writing or delivering their policies and procedures.
- Technical communicators who are looking to improve their skills, find a new job or need help with their processes.

We are technical writing specialists, also known as technical communicators, documentation specialists, technical authors and technical writers.