
How to Write a Tutorial

A Beginners Guide

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Index

Introduction	02
Do Not Waffle	03
Editing, Editing and More Editing	04
Spelling	05
Don't Use Fancy Fonts	05
Save, Save Save	05
Know Your Subject	06
Putting Your Subject on Your Page	06
Jargon	07
Do Not Split Paragraphs over Two Pages	07
Do the Pretty Stuff Later	08
How long will it take to Write My Tutorial?	08
I've finished my Tutorial what now?	08
Think like a Beginner	09
Paragraph Numbering	10
Should You Use Graphics?	11
Coloured Text	12
How Long Should a Tutorial Be?	12
So what do I do now?	13
But I Won't Be Able To!	13

How to Write a Tutorial

Introduction

So, you want to create a tutorial?

If writing a tutorial was easy, then everyone would be doing it, and to be honest it can become a lot easier than people think.

Do I need to be a grammar expert? Not really, but it may help.

The only thing you really need is the ability to put your ideas down on paper, either in a physical or digital way.

Using this very short tutorial, I hope to get you started in helping others to gain from your experience.

I use little to no jargon and have aimed this at a complete beginner. If you want to write advanced tutorials then sorry, this tutorial may not be for you.

So, are you ready?

Then start your journey and I hope you have fun reading the following.

Richard H. Eagle.

Do Not Waffle

This is a simple rule, don't waffle on about things. Be concise and make sure every word is required. Anything that doesn't need to be there can be taken out.

How many times have you opened a tutorial and the first thing you see is:-

A history of the software used.

Sorry, but **you don't** need to write 10 pages about the history and version numbers of the software you will be using in the tutorial. That is 10 pages that you could be using for instructions.

So, once you have written for a set time, **save your work** and go back and edit it now! **Not in 50 pages time**, do it after a few pages and you will see that the pages you have written may need some trimming.

A quick example:-

Waffle is language without meaning; blathering, babbling, droning. One might waffle throughout an essay or a presentation, when not having enough material, or needing to fill in time.

Now, the above is waffling.

Waffle is used to pad out an essay or presentation to increase its length.

Done! Straight to the point.

To test your text, read it out loud to yourself. This is a little trick that does work. Does it sound like you are going on too long? If so, then trim your text.

Editing, Editing and More Editing

Yes, this is a **BIG** part of doing tutorials. I have already mentioned waffling, but editing is a different thing.

Did you notice that bit of space at the bottom of the previous page?

I could have waffled on for a bit to fill it up, but I chose not to. I wanted to look more professional by starting this new section on a new page and not splitting it.

You will get your own individual style after a while and this is one of the things I do.

I have already mentioned about trimming things down. Well this can easily be shown with this example:-

Select the mesh with your left mouse button, hold down your right mouse button and then select the adapt option from the menu that has appeared on the screen.

I make that **29 words**, or **130 characters** without spaces and **158** with spaces.

Now, I would use the above example to start with in a tutorial, but then I would tell the reader...

From now on, I will be changing **left mouse button** to – **LMB**, **right mouse button** to – **RMB**.

So, I could now use:-

Select the mesh with your LMB, hold down your RMB and then select the adapt option from the menu that has appeared on the screen.

That now changes to **25** words etc.

If you type out left mouse button or right mouse button it costs you:-

Left mouse button – **17 characters with spaces**.

Right mouse button - **18 characters with spaces**.

LMB or RMB – is only **3 characters** and this can take down the amount of text on a page that you have to type out.

But, make sure you tell your reader about it before you do it. **Don't just start abbreviating things as you will upset your reader.**

Spelling

Check your spelling as often as possible. Yes, I know you may be able to type fast but everyone makes mistakes. There is also something I call word blindness. By this I mean, you have typed it, and edited it X amount of times. Your brain says there are no mistakes.

And then... You give it to someone to check and they find loads of mistakes. This is because you know what it should say and so you override what your brain is telling you.

Always get someone to check your work.

Don't Use Fancy Fonts

This is a big problem I see a lot. You can tell the writer has just bought a dvd with X amount of thousands of new fonts on it and.... They want to put them all on the same page in various ways to make their work look impressive.

Sorry, but it will always look a mess. At the most use three different types of font, no more. This will give you a more professional look. Also, those Lord of the Rings fonts are a pain to read.

Remember:- If it looks wrong to you, then it will look even worse to the reader.

For this tutorial I have only use one font, **Calibri**. It provides me with the look I require and I have used it for a long time.

Save, Save Save

This is something you need to remember to do. Save every so often. I will leave the amount of time for you to decide, but please don't do it every four hours. All it takes is for something to go wrong and you have lost a lot of work. I save about every 10 minutes or so.

Do I use the automatic save option? No, but this is for personal reasons. When I am typing I can start getting a set amount of work done and then find out that the automatic save kicked in and it messed up part of the sentence or paragraph I was doing.

Always save more than you think you need and back up your files as required.
Again, better safe and mess up ten minutes work than mess up a whole days work.

Know Your Subject

If you don't know what you are wanting to show others, there is no way you will put a decent tutorial together.

Before putting anything down on your page, go through it X amount of times, to the point you know it in your sleep.

Now, you can start to put things down on the page.

Putting Your Subject on Your Page

Okay you are ready to start. You have your word processor of choice open (Mine is Word 2010) and.... Writers block hits! What do I do?

Type in this very simple bit of text.

Flipperty flapperty biperty boperty boo!

Okay, stop laughing! This is a little trick that will stop you getting writers block. Writers can get scared of a blank page, by putting something silly on the page makes the page no longer blank and it normally allows you to get started.

You can go back and take the silly text out, but at least you are now writing.

With Word 2010, I can add a front page for my document at any time, so I can happily get on with the typing and come back to it, but your word processor may not let you do this. If not, just put a blank page at the beginning. In fact, you may need two, one for the front cover and one for the index if it is a long tutorial.

So, you should have.

A front cover

A possible index page

Next you should have an introduction page that tells the reader what your tutorial is about. **Try to be friendly but not too jokey or childish.**

Just a single page is required and even then, you don't need to make it a full page.

The minimum I would do is half a page for an introduction page.

Titles should be larger than the text you are typing, and subheading should be larger than your writing text, but smaller than your headline text.

Please, please, **don't use all CAPITAL LETTERS** for your titles as it just looks like you are shouting.

I would also use bold text for **titles** and **subheaders**.

Another thing to do right at the beginning is to put on page numbering. This makes it a lot easier to figure out how big your tutorial is and also easier for your testers to refer back to you.

Jargon

Try to keep jargon to a minimum if possible, and if you do use it, explain what it means.

I mentioned above about subheadings, some of you may know what that is but for those that don't. A subheader is a piece of text, normally to the left hand side of the page that explains about that particular section.

Example:-

How to Use Subheadings

Explaining subheading usage

Subheaders are used to let the reader know about various parts of your tutorial and distinguish it from lists or bullet points.

As you can see from the above example, the title is larger than the subheader as it is more important than the subheader is smaller than the header, but again bold, to show it is of more importance than the actual main text.

Do Not Split Paragraphs over Two Pages

Try to keep paragraphs whole and not split them over two pages. If you are getting close to the bottom of your page, start a new page before you start that new paragraph.

Do the Pretty Stuff Later

Get your tutorial down first and then go back and do all the bold, underline, insert graphics etc.

I do this all the time; in fact, the only thing I change as I'm going is the centring of titles. **Everything else I leave until after I have got things down and saved.**

How long will it take to Write My Tutorial?

Don't be in a rush to complete your tutorial. Take your time; in fact you will be taking a lot longer than you think. The amount of time you take to make your tutorial does not reflect on how long it takes a user to read it.

A quick example:-

I can take up to four hours to write and check a tutorial that will take the reader of it about 10 minutes to do.

A user does not care about the time I have taken to make sure it works the first time they use it. All they care about is, does it work, can I make something etc.

I've finished my Tutorial what now?

Go back, check it, double check it and even check it again. Your first draft will never be your finished product. You may take up to five or more revisions before you have a version you want to put out.

Get as many people as you can to check your tutorial, not just friends, and get constructive criticism from them. Don't be put off if they give you bad news, in fact I would sooner have an honest tester than someone who is kissing up to me.

In fact I normally tell people when they are testing my tutorials:-

Rip this to shreds!

This way, they know I have given them permission to be as hard as they want.

Now, once I have my feedback, I either use or disuse that information. If something is coming up with all testers, it gets changed. If it is a quibble about how something is phrased, I may let it go, but 98% of the time if my testers say it needs changing, then it gets changed.

Think like a Beginner

Unless you are writing advanced tutorials, remember that you are aiming your tutorial at beginners.

Richard's think like a beginner routine:-

Sit in front of the computer, relax and then forget everything you know about subject you are doing in the tutorial.

Now, work through the tutorial and be awkward with it. What does this mean? How do I do that?

If you pass each section then you have done the tutorial right.

If something feels wrong, go back and change it in the tutorial.

Example of thinking like a beginner:-

How do you switch on your computer?

If you said, I press the button on the front of the computer or the one on the laptop, then you have **failed**.

First you must have a computer; the computer needs to be powered up, either by its battery being charged or by plugging it into the electrical socket.

In the case of it being in an electrical socket, you need to make sure that the switch is switched to the On position.

Now, you can press the power on switch on your computer.

Just for fun, try and write down on a piece of paper how you would make a cup of coffee. Break it down and see how many steps it actually takes.

A quick note, **do NOT treat your readers as children or patronise them**. Explain to them that there is a reason for doing it in this way and that after a short while you will not be giving them step by step instructions.

Once you have given people instructions on how to switch on a computer, you know you can just say, switch on your computer and they will know what to do.

Paragraph Numbering

This is a little thing I have done for years. If you can do your instructions with paragraph numbers, you will make it so much easier for people to read it.

The reason I do this is:-

You get a phone call, the kids throw their food on the floor, the postman arrives with a parcel, you have a coffee break and a Skype chat and now... Where did I get to?

Put a number there and they can come straight back to where they left off.

A very simple trick, but it does work.

When doing this, always start single numbers with 0 (zeros). This will look better and does keep numbers in order.

Example:-

01. Plug in the computer into the power socket if required.
02. Make sure that the power socket has been switched to the On position.
03. Press the Power On switch on your computer and wait for it load up.

There you go, how easy would it be to follow that?

Only number sections that you want the reader to do something with, leave other text without numbering.

04. You may need to type in your username and password. If so, do it when the appropriate options appear.

The above is a very simple explanation of how I do things.

Once you go into another section, then start again at 01 etc. don't just carry on numbering continuously through your tutorial.

Remember to check everything works and know it works. I have had students tell me my tutorials don't work and then I have gone through them with them at my side and found out that they had jumped past certain parts.

If you are confident and know your tutorial works, then stand your ground.

Should You Use Graphics?

I will always say yes to this if it is applicable. For this tutorial I don't need a lot of graphics, but if I was doing one for modelling in a 3D program, then, yes I would.

A picture is worth a thousand words and something as simple as showing a picture of what you want your reader to do or see is a huge asset.

Use screenshots if possible to explain what they should be seeing at the moment. This gives your reader the confidence to know that they are doing it right. **Don't go wild and have hundreds of screenshots**, just enough to detail your tutorial.

What I normally do is add a line that says:-

Your screen should now look similar to the screenshot above.

I use the word **similar** as the reader may not have my computer system, so I cannot say, should look like.

Most word processors now allow you to add arrows to your page and these are great for pointing out things that are required, such as particular icons etc. that you want the reader to use. When using arrows, stay to the same style and colour for certain items. A **red one** for important things, a **blue one** that may be of interest etc. I will leave this to you to get your own particular style.

The one thing I would be careful about is making sure your graphics are not copyrighted, taken from the internet without permission etc.

If possible make your own graphics or use screenshots.

Also be careful of what the graphics are. What does not upset you, may **offend** others. So, just take your time and consider your reader.

Coloured Text

If something is not to be done or would cause a problem, change its text to red and make it bold. Use green for things that need to be done. People understand that **green** is fine and **red** means is a warning.

Example:-

Move your cursor over your model, **select your left mouse button**, **not the right one** at this time.

You only need to do this a few times and your reader will understand what you are doing.

How Long Should a Tutorial Be?

This is dependent on the subject. Remember that I mentioned that I wrote a computer course? Well, I didn't do it as one huge tutorial; I broke it down in to several sections. The whole course must have been about 500 plus pages, but I did it this way:-

Word Processing

Spread sheets

Internet

Email

There was more but I'll just use these as an example.

So, that's already four parts of the whole project.

Now, for the word processing part, I made it into 10 tutorials on various subjects:-

Loading the word processor

Using the keyboard

Using the shift\capital keys

I won't waffle on with the others, but you can see how I split things up.

Each section was about **15 pages** as I had learned that this was about the right amount of pages to time ratio that a student would hold that amount of information.

They could then have a little chat with other students, and be ready to start the next one.

The one thing you don't want to do is overload your reader with information. If you do, they won't want to carry on. Do it in nice easy 15 page steps and then your reader will want more.

Students used to love this way of learning as they could go at their own pace, those that wanted to take their time could do so and they were never made to feel as if they were holding the class back.

If you have the confidence of the reader, then you can help them to learn in their time and pace.

So what do I do now?

Get out your word processor and try to write a little tutorial. Nothing complicated, start off with small steps and you will soon be striding through tutorials.

But I Won't Be Able To!

The only person stopping you from writing is... **Yourself**. Trust in yourself and you will be able to do it. All authors start off the same, scared to put pen to paper or finger to keyboard, but they get over it.

Keep your early tutorials in a safe place and in 6 months, come back and look at them and see how far you have come.

I hope you have enjoyed this short tutorial on how to make tutorials. I could have gone on a lot longer on various subjects, but this will give you a start and hopefully start you on your journey to writing your own tutorials.