

HOW TO WRITE INSTRUCTIONS

One of the commonest types of writing is that which explains processes.

Such writing can be called 'instructions', procedures, and occasionally manuals. For convenience, we'll use the word 'instructions'.

Like every other type of writing, there are commonly agreed ways to do this.

How do we manage this?

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THE INGREDIENTS (OR CONTENTS)

The first information they need is *what they need*.

You need to show the reader what **ingredients** are necessary.

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There are two ways to do this:

Illustration and list of contents

Or you can be more specific:

Illustration with labels

This way there is no possibility of confusion.

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THE PROCESS

The next stage is to describe the **process** that is involved.

Think of this as like a set of stepping stones.

You take one step, and then another, and another - until you have completed the process.

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Now a set of stepping stones are connected one after the other in space. But with instructions, the connection is in time - or even in logic. How to represent this clearly?

By **numbering** the stages.

The numbers show the order you must follow. You do Stage 1, then stage 2, and so on.

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WORDS AND PICTURES

Instructions depend on making sure the reader is clear about everything.

Imagine you were trying to explain something complicated - like making a 3D Christmas decoration.

And you were trying to do it just in words!

Take a compass and draw 12 circles of equal diameter. Now draw three equilateral triangles inside those circles, such that the triangles take up most of the interior of the circle, leaving only three narrow flaps at the outside. Now fold these flaps inward, leaving the centre part of the circle...

STOP!!!

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It's too hard, isn't it?

Why? Because words have to be interpreted by the brain before they make sense.

If we read or hear

Equilateral triangle

we have to visualise

before we can go on. In written instructions, there are often too many of these 'interpretations' for us to handle.

So what do we need to clarify things?

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How? With pictures!

Pictures don't need interpreting. We instantly 'see' what the concept is.

Equilateral triangle =

Of course, it's not necessary to explain *everything* in pictures.

But **words and pictures** together are a wonderful combination.

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There are two types of image:

Photos

Diagrams

Both are powerful. Use one or the other to make it clear what you mean.

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The combination of ***words and pictures***, *for each stage of your instructions*
- should make them as clear as any reader needs.

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One last point needs to be made. What about the sort of language you should use?

The best advice is the KISS principle:

K eep
I t
S imple
S tupid

Don't use big words, unless they are necessary. This

should ***not*** be described as a

A writing implement with graphite element

but as

A pencil

The rule is - choose the simplest, most common word available. Keep your sentences short. The object is to be clear, not poetic.

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So let's sum up.

Instructions need

A LIST OF INGREDIENTS OR CONTENTS

A SERIES OF NUMBERED STAGES, SHOWING THE MAIN PROCESSES

TEXT AND PICTURES ... PHOTOS AND/OR DIAGRAMS

SIMPLE LANGUAGE

And happy procedural writing!!