Usability Testing: Creating Useful Technical Documentation

No matter how good a document looks, only a usability test can determine if the document is as useful as intended for the intended audience. Usability test a technical document by selecting a representative sample of readers that will use the document. The writer monitors the participants as they perform the tasks specified in the document. The writer can give helpful feedback but notes where the participant has difficulty in the instructions and considers the parts for editing and/or revision.

It may be surprising how much will have to be revised and how many times the process may have to be repeated until the documentation needs no more revisions. It is important that the participants understand that it is the document that is being tested and not the participants.

Usability testing is the final stage of technical writing methodology. Technical writers who practice usability testing will produce better technical documentation and become better technical writers regardless of how good they are. The five stages of technical writing methodology includes:

1. Perform front-end analysis where with the purpose and intended users are determined.
2. Gather the information from proposals, drawings, handbooks, SME interviews, etc. (specific technical expertise may be important depending on the topic).
3. Organize the information to determine what should be included to support the purpose of the document for intended users.
4. Present the information - hardcopy print, on-line, for classroom, pdf, html, etc.
5. Perform the usability test.

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