TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION NINTH EDITION   **JOHN M. LANNON**

Designing and Testing the Document for Usability

Chapter Overview

Web Icons

Multiple Choice Quiz

Exercises

Collaborative Exercises

Web Destinations

Models and Templates

Projects and Case Studies

Designing and Testing the Document for...

Chapter Overview

Before a product or document reaches its users, manufacturers test the usability of that product, including the documentation that comes along with it. A product with many "bugs," or documentation that is incomplete or overly complex will alienate users.

These days more firms are involving the technical writer as a member of the design team, addressing issues involving interface design and "human factors" at the very beginning of the design process. This trend is called "user-centered design." By involving the technical writer at the very beginning as an advocate of sorts for the average user, the user's needs and problems are foregrounded during the design process rather than after the fact. The hope is that if this trend continues, technical documentation could eventually be rendered obsolete. Product designs and interfaces would be made so intuitive and user-friendly that no manual would be needed. This is the natural evolution of the idea of writing manuals with a goal that they would not be read. The natural next step is for the manual to disappear altogether. [You can read more about research and the sub-field of human factors research and usability testing in the **Hot Topics** section. There are a number of professional organizations one can join to pursue this topic further.]

Even with these developments in the field, there is still considerable resistance to the notion of "user-centered design." It may seem counterintuitive, since the products are obviously made to be used, but in certain fields, design is produced as an end in itself, and the users are considered the weakest link, an afterthought. These fields are computer science (mainframe, networking, and code-centric university programs, as opposed to graphical user interface and simulation or VR-centric university programs), and some areas of engineering, mostly those whose products don't often reach the hands of average people.

User-centered design had its initial impetus in Scandinavian countries and has spread from there. In those countries it is not only associated with fine design of consumer artifacts, but also user-centered industrial design, as in factories or other industrial workspaces.

Usability testing involves both *alpha* testing by the engineers of the product and the authors of a document and *beta* testing by the users of the product. Again, the trend in the field is to involve users as early in the process as possible. The users of a document must be able to easily locate, understand, and use the information in it. Beta testing involves testing as closely as possible to actual situations with people who will actually use the product or document. Online documents have unique usability issues and have different criteria for usability testing than those for printed documents.