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16. Book Design Overview

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Sexy Technical
Communication

**Book Design
Overview**

David McMurray

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Book Design Overview

The following provides an overview of the typical components of a printed technical book and the typical content, format, style, and sequence of those components. Certainly, no single user guide, technical reference manual, quick-reference document, or other such document would actually have all of these components designed and sequenced in precisely the way you are about to read. Instead, this review will give an overview of the possibilities—let's say the range of possibilities.

Before you begin reading the following, grab a number of hardware and software books so that you can compare their content, style, format, and sequencing to what is discussed here.

For even more detail than you see here, consult these two standard industry resources:

- Sun Technical Pubs. *Read Me First!* Any recent edition. Prentice Hall.
- Microsoft Corporation. *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications*. Any recent edition. Microsoft Press.

Front and Back Covers

Product documents for paying customers usually have nicely designed front covers even if, on the inside, the book is bargain basement in terms of its quality. On the front cover, you will typically see some or all of the following:

- Company name
- Product name
- Product platform or operating system
- Product version and release numbers
- Book title
- Company or product logos
- Trademark symbols
- Artwork
- Book order number
- Company or product slogan

It can be challenging to figure out a good format for the company name, product name, and book title. Sometimes, these can amount to a whole paragraph of text! Companies are quite divided on whether to indicate version and release numbers on front covers—some do; some don't. Almost always, however, you'll see the platform indicated—whether the product is for the Macintosh, the PC, UNIX, and so on.

The back cover of hardcopy user guides and manuals is usually very simple. Typically, it contains the book order number, the name of the company with appropriate trademark symbols, a copyright symbol and phrasing as to the ownership of the book, and a statement as to which country the book was printed in. You'll also find bar codes on the back cover. See if your software can generate a bar code—you just access the bar code utility and type in the book order number, and the utility generates the bar code.

Title Page

The title page is typically a duplicate of the front cover, but with certain elements omitted. Typically omitted are the artwork, company or product logos, and slogans. Some technical publications omit the title page altogether because of the seemingly needless duplication. (And in a print run of 20,000 copies, a single page means a lot!)

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Edition Notice

The edition notice is typically the first instance of regular text in a technical publication, although it is typically in smaller type. It occurs on the backside of the title page. If the technical publisher is taking the lean-and-green approach and eliminating the title page, the edition notice will appear on the backside of the front cover.

No one likes to read fine print, but take a look at the statements typically included in an edition notice:

- Date of publication: included not only is the year but sometimes even the month that the book was published.
- Edition number: whether the book is a first, second, or third edition
- Product applicability: the edition notice typically indicates which platform, version, and release number of the product the book applies to.
- Full title of the book: shown in italics
- Disclaimers: shockingly, product manufacturers will make statements to the effect that they do not guarantee the book is technically correct, complete, or free from writing problems or that the product is free from minor flaws or that it meets the needs of the customer. You'll be able to find additional disclaimers beyond these as well.
- Copyright symbol and statement: you'll see the circle-C copyright symbol and some statement warning readers not to copy the book without permission.
- Copyright permissions: the high-tech world often moves so rapidly that instead of creating their own versions of a product component and its corresponding documentation, companies will simply buy the code or design and the rights to reprint the documentation as well. This usually entails copyright acknowledgement in the

edition notice (although if a lot of borrowing has happened, publishers must get creative about where to put all these acknowledgements).

- Reader responses: sometimes, the edition notice will include some encouragement to customers to contact the company about product or documentation concerns. Instructions on how to contact the company are sometimes included in the edition notice. Included also is often a rather unfriendly statement that any customer communication becomes the property of the company.
- Trademarks: some technical publications list known trademarks in the edition notice. This includes both the company's own trademarks and the trademarks of other companies referenced in the book. With the explosion of new products in the high-tech world, and thus the explosion of trademarks, some publications essentially throw up their hands and insert a simple statement that any references to trademarked product names are owned by their respective companies.

Disclaimers

See the section on edition notices, where disclaimers are usually tucked away. If a product or its publication needs a whole separate page for its disclaimers, I'm not buying it!

Trademarks

Although many companies do list their own and other companies' trademarks in the edition notice, some prefer to list them on a separate page, just after the edition notice. These placement decisions are almost strictly the province of company attorneys; as a writer, you may have to comply no matter how bad the the decision is in terms of book design or writing style. Remember, you list only those trademarked product names that occur in that particular book.

You'll notice that some publications go to extreme measures with trademarks: they'll asterisk or footnote the first, or even every occurrence of a trademarked product name. But again, these are directives of company attorneys unto which technical writers must resign themselves, however sadly.

Warranties

More legal stuff. These are the "guarantees" that the company will support concerning its product. Sometimes these are published in the front matter of the book; but, more appropriately from a book-design standpoint, they are printed on a separate card and inserted in the shrinkwrap of the book or the product. Again, as with edition notices, this is text you simply bring in as "boilerplate" and position in the right place within the book.

However, you should be aware that companies sometimes maintain multiple versions of edition notices, safety notices, warranties, communication statements and other such. As a writer, you must make sure that you are using the right version (and, in finding out which is correct, you'll have a chance to get out and meet lots of new people in the company!). And whatever you do, don't change the text of these boilerplate items, however horribly they are written. Changes typically must be approved by company attorneys (who typically do so begrudgingly and only after many efforts on your part and after much time has passed).

Safety Notices

Hardware products typically have a section of safety notices at the front of their books. These may occur as a subsection of the preface, for example, or as a separate section in their own right. These sections typically bring together all of the danger, warning, and caution notices that occur throughout the book and arrange them in some sort of logical way. But even with this up-front alert, hardware books still place the individual notices at the points where they apply.

Communication Statements

Hardware books also require communications statements as stipulated by the governments of the countries to which these products are shipped. In the U.S., the FCC requires certain communications statements depending on the "class" of the hardware product. As a writer, you must be careful to use the right communication statement for the product you are documenting—and not to edit the statement in any way (holy legal words!).

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Table of Contents

The table of contents (TOC) usually contains at least a second level of detail (the first-level headings in the actual text) so that readers can find what they need more precisely. Writers, editors, and book designers typically argue about the sequencing of the TOC. In terms of usability, it's much better to have the TOC as close to the front of the book as possible, if not at the very first of the book. In terms of legalities, however, people worry that all those communication statements, warranties, copyrights, trademarks, and safety notices should come first. In those places where usability wins out, books use every tactic they can to get this legalistic material out of the front matter: warranties are put on separate cards and shrink-wrapped with the book or product; warranties, communication statements, trademarks and other such may be dumped in appendixes.

List of Figures

Technical manuals for ordinary users typically don't have lists of figures. In fact, the figures themselves typically do not have full-blown figure titles. But this isn't to say that a list of figures has no place in technical manuals. It all depends on the reader and the reader's needs—and the content of the book as well. If the book contains tables, illustrations, charts, graphs, and other such that readers will want to find directly, the figure list is in order.

Preface

The function of the preface is to get readers ready to read the book. It does so by:

- characterizing the content and purpose of the book
- identifying or even briefly describing the product the book supports
- explaining the type of reader for whom the book is meant
- outlining the main contents of the book
- showing any special conventions or terminology used in the book
- providing support and marketing numbers, and other such

In traditional book publishing, the preface comes before the table of contents; but as discussed previously in the table of contents section, technical publishing people want the TOC to come earlier in the book for usability reasons.

Body Chapters

Oh yes, and there is actual text in these books—it isn't all front matter! Little else to say here other than most technical books have chapters or sections, and, in some cases, parts.

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Appendixes

As you know, appendixes are for material that just doesn't seem to fit in the main part of a book but can't be left out of the book either. Appendixes are often the place for big unwieldy tables. Some technical publications have things like warranties in the appendixes. In terms of format, an appendix is just like a chapter—except that it is named "Appendix A" or some such, and the headers and footers match that different numbering and naming convention (A-1, A-2, and so on for pages in Appendix A).

Glossary

Some technical publications include a section of specialized terms and their definitions. Notice that most glossaries use a two-column layout. Typically the each term and its definition make up a separate paragraph, with the term lowercased (unless it is a proper name) and in bold, followed by a period, then the definition in regular roman. Notice too that definitions are typically not complete sentences. Multiple definitions are typically identified by arabic numbers in parentheses. Glossary paragraphs also contain *See* references to preferred terms and *See also* references to related terms.

Index

Indexes are also typically two-column and also contain *See* references to preferred terms and *See also* references to related terms.

Reader-Response Form

Before the rise of the Internet and social media, some technical publications contained a hardcopy form to enable readers to send in comments, questions, and evaluation of the book. Of course, it turns out that these forms more often elicit complaints about faulty function in the product that the book documents. With the rise of the Internet, these forms have gone online, and books merely point to their location online.

Book Design and Layout

Typically, user guides and manuals produced by hardware and software manufacturers are designed in a rather austere and spartan way. High-tech companies develop new versions and releases of their product sometimes every nine months. In this context, sophisticated design is just not practical. Here are some of the typical layout and design features you'll see:

- Page size is often determined by packaging considerations as well as by standard page sizes available with printing companies. When page size is not a constraint, some companies will use the 8.5 × 11-inch page size—this makes production much easier for writers.
- Pages are typically designed with alternating right and left pages. The footer for the left (even) page starts with the page number and ends with the title of the book. The footer for the right (odd) page starts with the title of the chapter and ends with the page number.
- Practice is mixed on whether page numbering is consecutive throughout the book or by-chapter.
- Unless pages are rather small, the hanging-head design of headings in relation to pages is quite common in technical manuals. The hanging indent is usually one inch to one-and-a-half inches.
- Fonts are often 12-point Times New Roman for body text and Arial for headings. Standard line spacing and word spacing are used.
- Margins are fairly standard, one to two inches all the way around. Typically, an extra half-inch is used on inside margins to allow for binding.
- Typically, color is *not* used in these manuals and guides, usually out of cost and efficiency considerations.



All technical publications are designed exactly the same.

- True
- False

Check Answer