Technical Writing *for Non-Writers*

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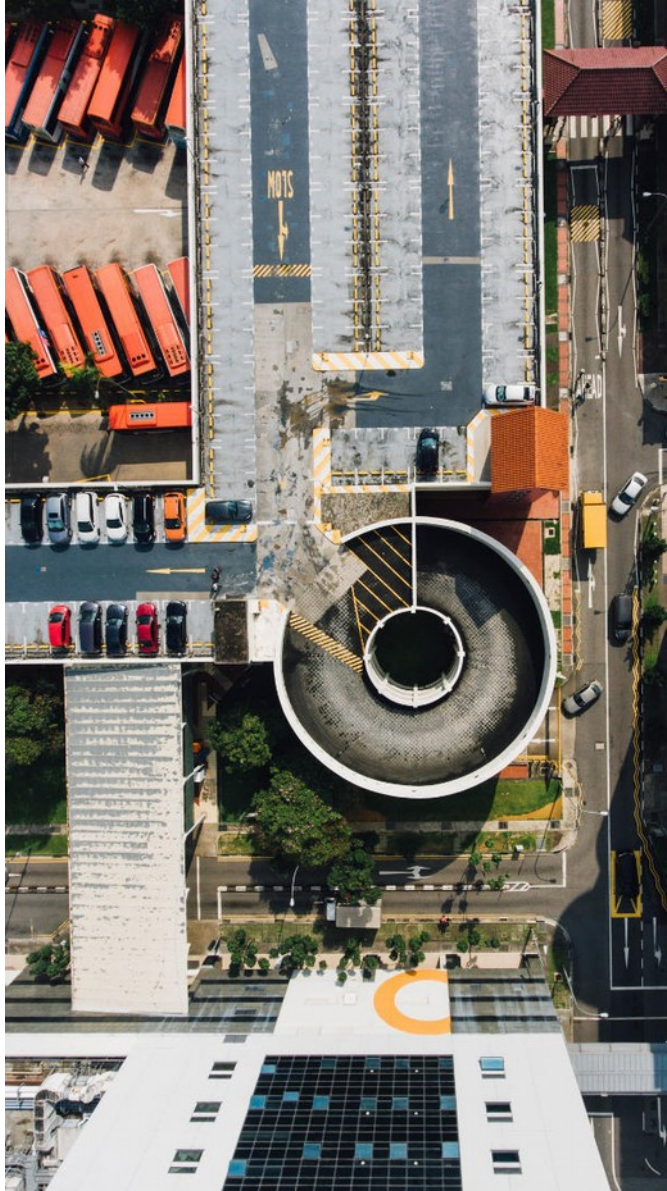
Overview

1. Principles
2. Best Practices
3. Quality Assurance
4. Exercise: Analyzing & Optimizing a Text



Principles

Principles

#1 Change Perspective

step into your audience’s shoes

Principles

#2 Make it Easy to...

process information

follow instructions

remember information

Principles

#3 Consider the Reading Situation

frustration

little time

noisy environment

non-native speaker

Principles

Conclusion

obey KISS (“keep it short and simple”)

short sentences, simple grammar, simple words

Best Practices

Types of Information

Descriptive and *Task-Based* Information

descriptive: basic information, concepts, reference

task-based: how do I achieve my goal?

most documentation needs both

for orientation, clearly separate: by using titles, layout

Types of Information

Example: “Task-Based Information”

https://www.suse.com/doc/sle-ha-12/install-quick/data/install-quick.html#sec_ha_inst_quick_test

Testing Resource Failover

1. Open a terminal and ping 192.168.2.1, your virtual IP address:

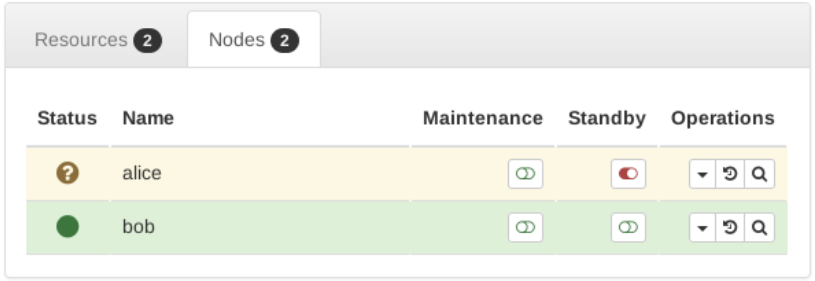
```
ping 192.168.2.1
```

2. Log in to your cluster as described in Logging In to the Hawk2 Web Interface.

3. In Hawk2 *Status* > *Resources*, check which node the virtual IP address (resource admin_addr) is running on. We assume the resource is running on alice.

4. Put alice into *Standby* mode (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Node alice in Standby Mode



5. Click *Status* > *Resources*. The resource admin_addr has been migrated to bob.

Writing

Target Audience & Purpose

know your audience

- level of detail
- involve readers: “you”

form follows function

- what is the purpose of a word/sentence/ paragraph/section?
- is it an instruction, a description, a warning?

Writing

Consistency

consistent spelling and punctuation

consistent choice of words

parallel phrases and structure

brevity

Writing

Example: “Empty Calories”

“An effective business requirements analysis should be performed to determine the right level of security and hardening to be applied to a server or defined as part of a baseline server build.”

“To find the right level of security and hardening for a server, analyze your business requirements.”

Structure

A Recipe

1. intro: invite the reader in
2. brief background: state the issue
3. sharing the news: name the solution
4. getting technical: solve the issue
5. conclusion: important facts, next steps

Structure

Example: “Flat Tire”

intro

If you are a car driver, you might have found yourself in the following situation:

background

You are stuck on the side of the road with a flat tire.

sharing the news

As no help is in sight, you need to change the tire yourself.

getting technical

1. Apply the hand brake and put the car into a parking position.
2. Place a heavy object in front of the tires.
3. Take out the spare tire and the jack. […]

conclusion

After you have successfully installed the new tire, put the old tire in the trunk and take it to a mechanic.

Structure

Modes of Text Consumption

reading cover to cover

skimming

browsing

searching (tables, indexes, full-text)

Structure

Perspective of the Reader

complex information

- split into chunks
- *Miller's Law*: 7 ± 2 items

task analysis

- focus on goals
- does structure reflect the user's goals?

Structure

Order & Hierarchy

first things first: what all users need to know (early

4.1 Managing User Accounts

4.2 Enforcing Password Policies

4.3 Managing Quotas

flat hierarchies

- 3 levels: 1. – 1.1 – 1.1.1
- be pragmatic, not scientific
- avoid *lonely sections*: 1. – 1.1 – 2. – 2.1 – 2.2

Phrasing

Titles

content of the section

information type of the section

- *descriptive*: nouns, example: “Types of Frobnicators”
- *task-based*: verbs, example: “Installing Frobnicator”

distinctive information first

- “~~How to Install Frobnicator~~”
- “Installing Frobnicator”
- “~~Frobnicator Setup~~”
- “Setting Up Frobnicator”

Phrasing

Sentences

rule of thumb: one sentence, one idea

first things first

- “~~The PIN, which must not be noted on the credit card, consists of 4 digits.~~”
- “The PIN consists of 4 digits. Do not note the PIN on the credit card.”

instructions: where to act? what to do?

- “~~Search for ‘foo bar’ in /etc/hosts.~~”
- “In /etc/hosts, search for ‘foo bar’.”

Phrasing

Avoid Interruptions

move particles to the beginning or the end

“however”, “nevertheless”, “therefore”, “for example”, “if necessary”…

- “~~They are not, however, marked as installed.~~”
- “However, they are not marked as installed.”

same goes for long commands

keep together phrasal verbs

- “~~You can shut the server down.~~”
- “You can shut down the server.”

Phrasing

Avoid Ambiguities

titles that become accumulations of nouns

- "~~Clone Resource Agent Requirements~~"
- "Requirements for Clone Resource Agents"
- "**Cloning* Resource Agent Requirements*"

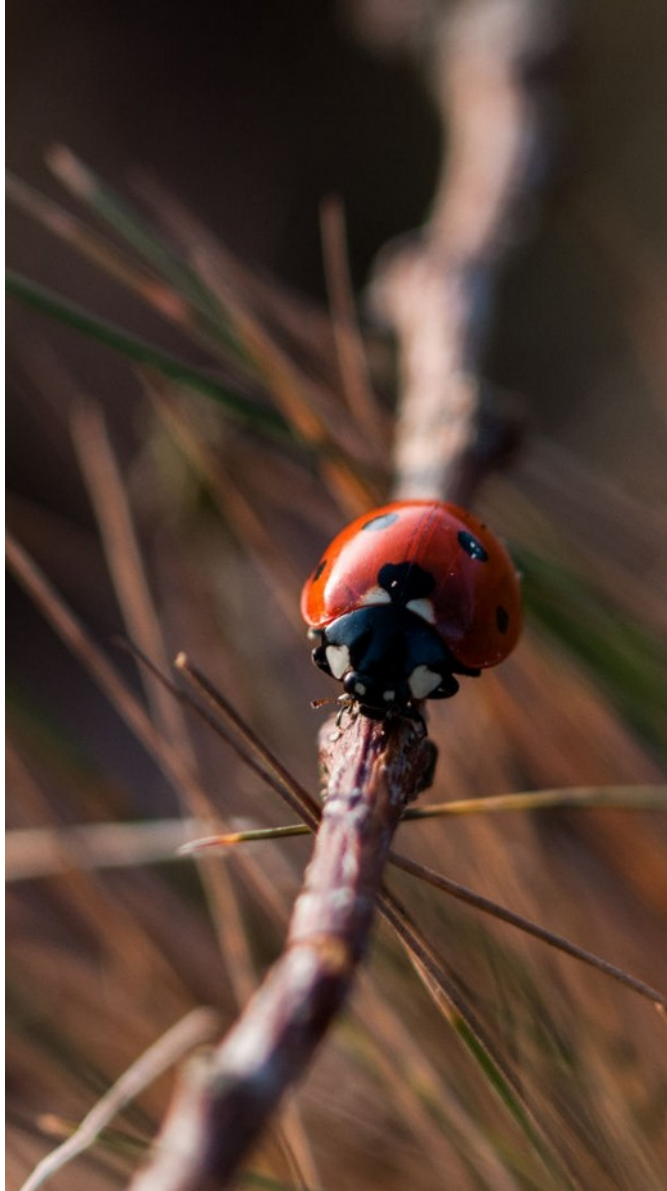
what are gerunds (-ing) referring to?

- "~~Encrypt the password using grub2-mkpassswd-pbkdf2.~~"
- "Encrypt the password by using grub2-mkpasswd-pbkdf2."
- "**Encrypt the password that uses grub2-mkpasswd-pbkdf2.*"

Phrasing

Use Simple Words

“~~utilize~~”	“use”
“~~indicate~~”	“show” “tell” “say”
“~~prerequisite~~”	“requirement”
“~~is able to~~”	“can”
“~~in order to~~”	“to”



Phrasing

Avoid Filler

filler words

- “basically,” “essentially,” “simple,” “just,” “easily”

unnecessary modification

- “several ~~different~~ types” “~~already~~ existing” “~~completely~~ new”

Giving Instructions

Going Step by Step

structure:

1. name goal
2. name requirements
3. use list of steps (correctly ordered!)

7-10 steps (or split into multiple procedures)

active voice for actions:

- “~~The system is configured by …~~”
- “Configure the system by …”

backgrounds and concepts: before the procedure!

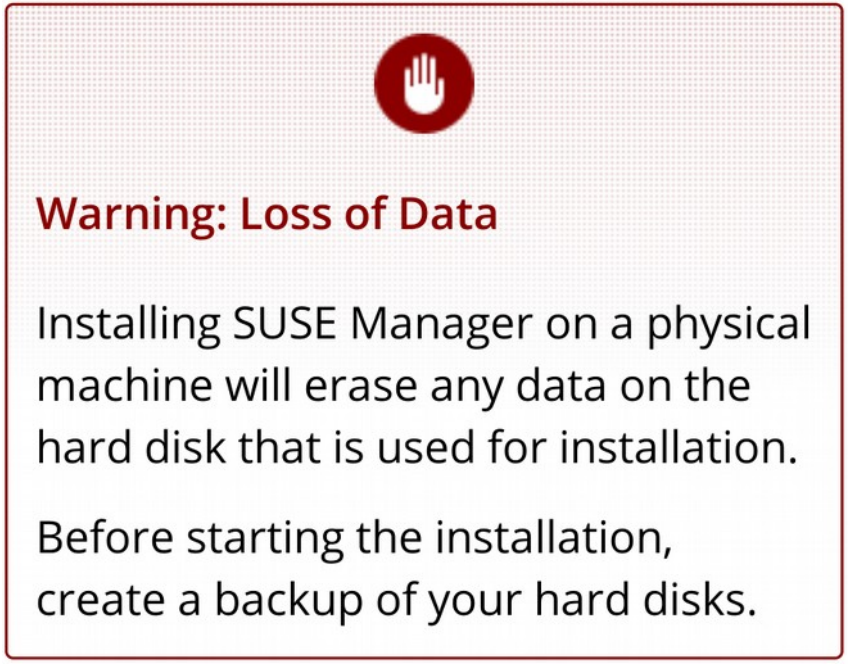
Warnings & Tips

Safety Dance

add warning *before* the step or action where danger arises

ANSI Z535 American standard:

1. signal word
2. type and source of danger
3. possible consequences
4. avoidance



Best Practices

Summary

3 principles

2 types of information

writing

structure

phrasing

instructions

warnings

Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance

Are We There Yet?

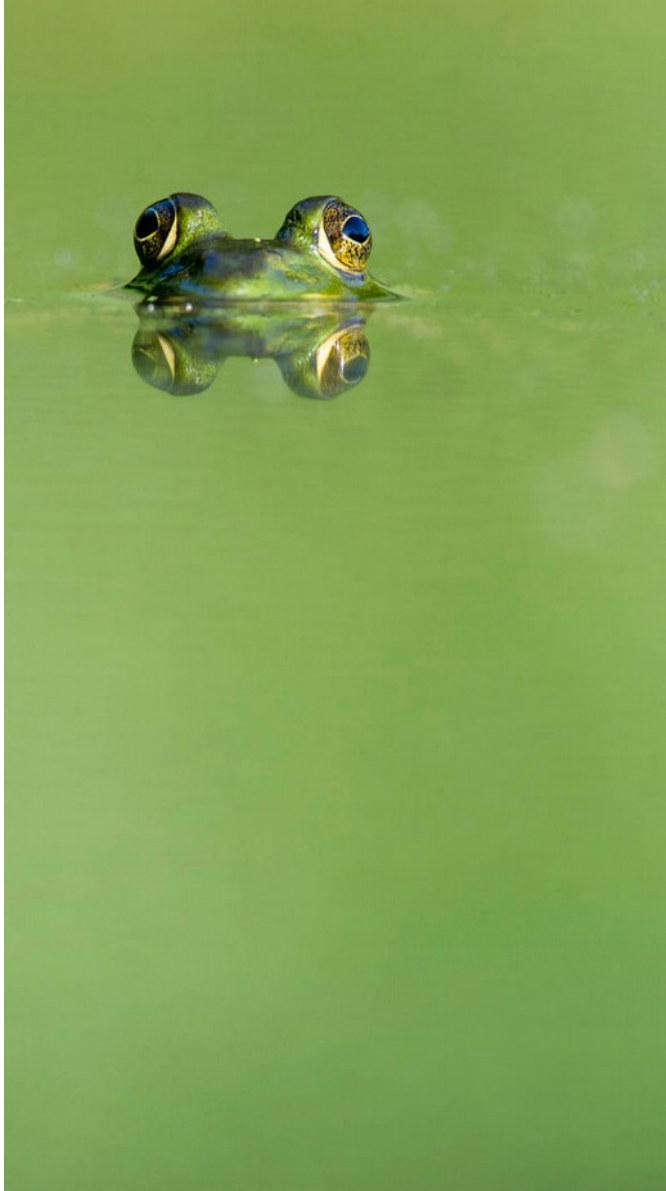
automated & human

- structural review
- language review

human only (for now!)

- technical review
- peer review

remove unnecessary information
(target audience!)



If I had more time,
I would have written a shorter letter.”

– attributed to H.D. Thoreau, Voltaire, Augustin,
Mark Twain, Blaise Pascal

Sources

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- Photos from https://unsplash.com (under CC0)
- Many thanks to my colleague Tanja who created the original version of this talk

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