

Implementation and Benefits of Minimalism in Technical Writing

Aurélien Delattre, Yann-Olivier Grohan

*UFR d'Études Interculturelles de Langues Appliquées, Université Paris Diderot
5 rue Thomas Mann, 75205 paris Cedex 5, France*

Abstract

This article explains how minimalism can improve the quality and effectiveness of technical documentation. In the first part, we will define minimalism and its main principles, such as action-oriented approach and topic-based authoring. In the second part, we will conduct a comparative analysis based on the technical documentation of two working environments: Societe Générale Corporate Investment Banking and HR Access. We will analyse how minimalism impacts the effectiveness and searchability of the documentation. These different minimalism approaches depend on quality criteria adopted for documentation. As a consequence, the decision to apply minimalism or not depends on the context (targeted-audience, access to users feedback). To conclude, we will identify some of the best practices to implement minimalism in any documentation department.

Keywords: Minimalism, Information design, Information development, User feedback, Learning process, Task-based approach, Scenario-based information, Topic-based authoring, Content-architecture.

Words count: 1878

1 Introduction

The main basic rule in technical communication is to write for the end-user. Unfortunately when it comes to put theory into practice, this theory shows its limits. Indeed, many technical writers have no access to end-user feedback and only validate their work with developers or Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

To solve these issues, the idea of using Minimalism to improve the documentation efficiency and quality came in. To illustrate this point, we decided to compare two different companies and their documentation systems:

- Société Générale Corporate Investment Bank, the Investment Bank of the second largest financial institution in France.

- HR Access, a software vendor, integrator and outsourcing expert in Human Resources.

Based on our empirical observations, we focus on the analysis of the strength and weaknesses of the companies' documentation systems. Then, we define the

advantages of minimalism in the documentation production and efficiency. Finally, we give general recommendations to implement minimalism on a documentation department.

2 What is Minimalism?

Minimalism is a technical writing approach developed in the 1980s by John Carroll, a Professor of Information Sciences and Technology who was one of the founders of the study of human-computer interaction, one of the nine core areas of Computer Science identified by the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). John Carroll founded minimalism owing to his investigation on cognitive studies and learning research at Harvard University. Its main argument is that training material should be composed of short task-oriented chunks (topics) instead of being lengthy monolithic user manuals that explain everything in a long narrative fashion.

3 Implementing Minimalism in Companies

3.1 Implementing Minimalism at Société Générale Corporate Investment Bank

My role as a Technical Writer at the Investment Bank of Société Générale is to be in charge of the creation and update of online helps for internally developed applications and to design presentation leaflets for new applications and teams.

I was asked to conceptualize and write an online help on the new CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software at Société Générale CIB. It was a very important project since the company had invested a lot of time and money in the deployment of this software. In my first meeting with the manager of this project (who I will further refer to as my "client") I asked him to define the scope of the documentation. He told me he needed a getting started for end-users as fast as possible and that it had to focus only on the most important features of the software.

I thought that implementing minimalism on this project was the best answer to my client's needs. The first thing I did was to list all the features of the application and identify the most useful ones when getting started with it. Then I tested the application as if I was a new end-user myself and took notes of the questions that came to my mind during this process. I used those notes when writing procedures for end-users and strove to only include the information that the end-user needed to start using the software and nothing else. The result was a much shorter online help than the previous ones for other applications.

When I presented it to the client he was very pleased with it and said that if the end-users had questions about not yet documented features of the software he would ask me to add procedure about those features "on demand". It was very interesting because this way of working, named "Agile*" development, is becoming very popular in the development teams at Société Générale and they were very satisfied to learn that the technical writing team could also produce online helps in an "agile" way.

*Agile software development is a group of software development methods based on iterative and incremental development. It encourages rapid and flexible response to change throughout the development cycle

3.2 Implementing Minimalism at HR Access

I was recruited at HR Access to be in charge of the Spanish technical documentation. It had been several years since they had a full-time technical writer in this language, so they had fallen behind drastically. During the last five years, they only recruited apprentices who worked part-time on the Spanish documentation. Therefore, there was a lot of work waiting for me: updating their software documentation (obsolete since 2007) according to the law, but also completing the documentation with the new functionalities, were my main objectives.

In order to carry out those tasks, I had access to the technical documents written by the Spanish developers about every development or update. There existed two different technical documents for each subject: an ASD (Analysis Software Development) and a functional guide. The ASD was a long (up to 60 pages) and complicated Word document describing the new development and all its technical impacts on the software: creation of some pages, modification of processes, etc. The functional guide was less technical and described more the functionality in itself. Since there was nobody dealing with the Spanish documentation, the developers just handed those guides out to the customers.

When I browsed them for the first times, I felt completely lost. I could not understand the majority of the documents: they were too much detailed, too technical, and most of all, they did not focus on the main points. I concluded that the customers probably did not even read them at all. Therefore, I decided to rewrite the documents entirely by applying the principles of minimalism. Implementing minimalism was a great technique that simplified considerably the documentation. It also gave me the time (much needed) to carry out all my tasks punctually.

First, I focused on making the information easy to find, owing to a short paragraph describing the new functionality. This paragraph generally explained briefly what the functionality was about, as well as the reasons why it had to be added to the software. Secondly, I tried to put myself in the reader's shoes, that is to say as a Human Resources expert. This technique allowed me to understand better what such a reader would expect to see in the documentation: he already knew his field, so there was no need to describe in details the functionality. Then, I turned the documentation into an action-oriented approach, by dividing it in several small procedures, preceded by precise titles.

In conclusion, the documentation was much clearer and shorter than the one written by the developers. Besides, it became more effective, as it was end user oriented, which allowed the reader to know exactly what he had to do, step by step.

4 Advantages of Minimalism

We can investigate the main benefits of a minimalist documentation.

First, according to John Carroll, the whole idea behind minimalism is that the user is impatient and curious to use a product. Therefore, minimalism strives to focus on developing a short documentation. That implies cutting introductions, to start with the procedure right away. Carroll also suggests a drastic abbreviation of the documentation, in the explanatory information as well as in the procedure, to let the user discover the product alone, by exploration.

Secondly, a documentation using minimalism principles is more effective than the one who does not. Indeed, being an action-oriented approach, the minimalist documentation focuses on concrete procedure that the user must follow. As reported by Carroll, a procedure gets the user to be active, which is the best way to learn about the product. However, to meet the user needs, these procedures have to deal with real tasks that he wants to carry out.

In addition, a minimalist documentation ensures that it understand the user's world, which means that the documentation is clear and understandable by the user. The technical writer has to create a form of proximity with the user, by using his own vocabulary. If the user is an expert, then the writer has to use technical words. On the contrary, if the user is inexperienced, the writer has to use more simple words.

5 Limitations of Minimalism

However, we can wonder whether minimalism is a good approach for complex tasks or expert users (also called Subject Matter Experts - SMEs). In general, a minimalist documentation is more suited to novice users because it only gives the basic knowledge of a product or technology. More advanced users need to know different contexts and scenario that they are likely to be facing. A minimalist documentation is not exhaustive enough to do that.

In addition, according to Carroll, limiting the size of documentation with minimalism reduces the user errors that derive from his incapacity to coordinate a procedure with the product itself. Therefore, an expert that already knows the product does not need to have his documentation cut. In conclusion, it is hard to write a minimalist documentation that satisfies both SMEs and novice users.

Besides, as Yann and I could observe in our respective companies, it is complicated to have access to user feedback. Technical writers work in cooperation with the developers, to insure that the documentation is comprehensible. However, technical writers almost never have the real end users' opinion, which could be very helpful to improve the documentation. It would be interesting to create a user community, using meetings and social networks, to be in contact with the end users.

Furthermore, in some companies such as SGBC, the documentation of the projects that are not developed internally is written in India. It is then even more difficult to have user feedback because of the time difference.

6 Conclusion

Implementing minimalism in companies is a very efficient way to improve the quality of any documentation. Minimalism not only simplifies the documentation, but also lightens it, by only focusing on the main points. However, companies that want to put minimalism into practice need to follow several rules.

First, it is essential that technical writers have access to end-users feedback, as their opinion on the documentation will improve it considerably. It would be interesting to communicate with every user of the documentation (developers, experts, etc.) by organizing meetings and developing social networks. Besides, technical writers could add satisfaction surveys to their documentation to know if it was useful or not.

Then, they have to make sure that its technical writers work in synergy with the support department, to ensure that users can resolve their problems easily by reading the documentation.

Finally, technical writers must be Agile when dealing with documentation, to guarantee that it is always updated to the latest version.

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