

How to recognise a usable procedure

When you are writing a procedure, or even a longer document, pause from time to time and ask yourself “does the document I’m working on match this list?”

Characteristics

A usable procedure is:

complete

- it contains all the information a reader needs to carry out a single, well-defined task; including a clear explanation of anything he or she must know before using this procedure
- it contains standard information about the document itself, such as document owner, intended audience, change history and version/publication date
- it includes a contingency clause
- it does not include any irrelevant information

consistent

- it uses (and, if necessary, includes) a controlled vocabulary to avoid internal inconsistency, and ruthlessly avoids any tendency to “fine writing”: one thing, one word
- it follows house rules for the structure and lay-out of a procedure
- it does not contradict other procedures

correct

- it has been checked and approved by the document owner
- it has been checked by people responsible for the end users
- it is up to date and has been revised regularly: a procedure last updated more than six months ago is automatically “incorrect”

clear

- it uses short sentences and active verbs; a procedure consists mainly of imperatives
- it is logically constructed and reads from top to bottom; no “Before you do A, make sure you have already done B, unless someone already did C ...”

in context

- every procedure is related to a process and a process description: the procedure must make it clear in which process or processes the procedure is applicable
- carrying out one particular procedure may be a precondition for carrying out another: it must be clear where each procedure fits into the process or processes it is part of