

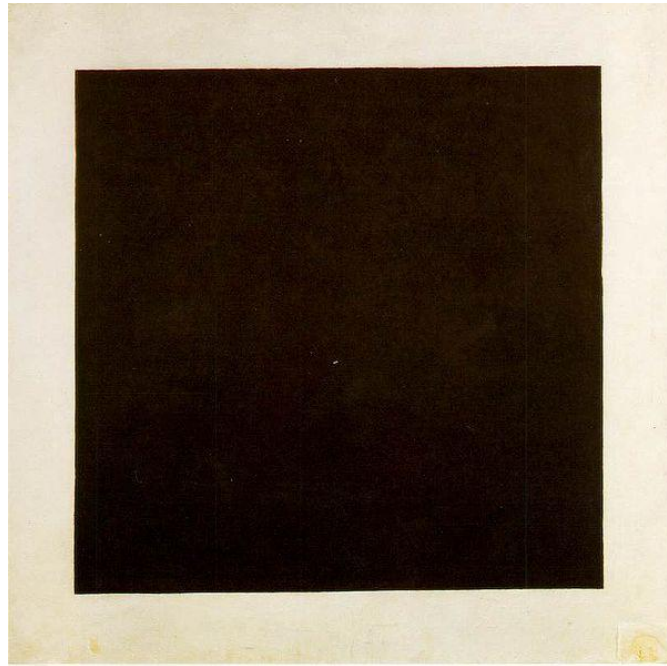
Topic-Based and Minimalist Writing

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Agenda

- History of minimalism
- Minimalist writing
- Topic-based writing

History of Minimalism



Kazimir Malevich, Black Square, 1913

Minimalism is not only about the arts, it is a theory of task-oriented and user-centered instruction and documentation.

Minimalist theory of J.M. Carroll

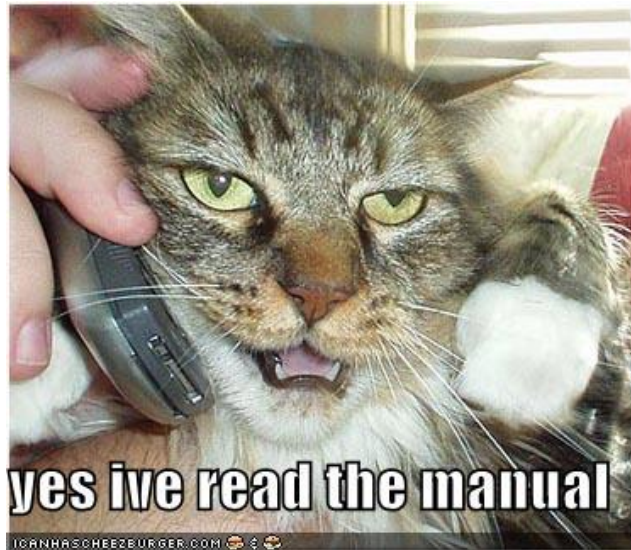
Minimalist theory is a framework for the design of instruction, especially materials for computer users.

Adult learners are not blank slates; they don't have funnels in their heads; they have little patience for being treated as "don't knows"... New users are always learning computer methods in the context of specific preexisting goals and expectations.

Carroll

Minimalist theory of J.M. Carroll

I love to read, but I don't read technical documentation for the pleasure.



And I still don't know how to use your product!

Principles of minimalism

- **Allow learners to start immediately on meaningful tasks.**
- **Minimize the amount of reading and other passive forms of training by allowing users to fill in the gaps themselves.**
- **Include error recognition and recovery activities in the instruction.**
- **Make all learning activities self-contained and independent of sequence.**

Minimalist Writing

In minimalist writing we:

- Document tasks, not tools or functions. Focus on what the user wants to accomplish.
- Help readers anticipate and avoid errors.
- Don't explain to users what they can discover for themselves or what is obvious.
- Use simple language and short sentences.
- Design content for nonlinear reading.
 - Readers can scan or read or skip text.
 - Readers can look at content in any order.

Basic rules

- **Use present tense and active voice verbs.**
- **Address the reader directly as “you.”**
- **Use short words, sentences, and paragraphs.**
 - Try not to use complex, compound sentences.
 - Use no more than 20 words in a sentence.
 - Use short, common words, and the simplest synonym.
 - Keep subject, verb, and object close together.
 - Keep paragraphs short.
 - Use bulleted lists to make information easy to scan.
 - Write descriptive headings that address user’s goals.

Basic rules, cont.

- **Describe tasks and features in the order in which users might approach them.**
- **Use simple, neutral text (clear to both native English speakers and international readers).**
- **Write informational topics that you can read and understand out-of-context.**
- **Identify content that can be shared.**
- **Get rid of:**
 - Words you don't need.
 - Steps that are obvious.
 - Topics that are unnecessary.
 - Functionality that might not need to be exposed.

Who's the reader

- **The key to minimalism is to know your audience.**
 - Users must be able to see their goals in the documentation.
 - Users must be able to achieve their goals using the documentation.
- **Identify what your readers (users) need to know.**
 - Focus on user goals, not system tasks.
 - How much detail depends on how sophisticated the user is.
- **Benefits**
 - You can organize documentation by user goals, not system interface.
 - You can write modularly, for reuse and to reduce redundancy.

Topic-Based Writing

What is a topic

- **A topic is a unit of information with a title and some form of content. It is short enough to be specific to a single subject or answer a single question, but long enough to make sense on its own and be authored as a unit.**
- **A topic is a complete topic when it has:**
 - A well defined heading.
 - Context that makes the topic relevant.
 - Additional information to understand that context.
 - Details about what to do.
 - Examples to help readers understand the topic.

If you write in complete topics, you can get consistently good results for reuse and global use.

Types of topics

■ Tasks

- Focus on what the user wants or needs to do.
- Are the essential building blocks.
- Task topics answer "How do I...?" questions.

■ Concepts

- Provide conceptual, descriptive or background information.
- Concept topics answer "What is..." questions.

■ Reference topics

- Describe regular features of a subject or product.
- Provide details a user needs to complete technical tasks.
- Often appear as lists and tables.

Rules for topic-based writing

- Use active voice and strong verbs.
- Use the present tense.
- Reduce dense text.
- Give users an immediate opportunity to act.
- Avoid lengthy introductory material.
- Write in a positive tone.
- Use simple sentence structure.
- Include articles to identify nouns.
- Use prepositions and relative pronouns to increase clarity.
- Repeat nouns rather than using pronouns.
- Limit adverbs and adjectives.

Why are we focused on topics

- Reusable/sharable components
- Reduce localization costs
- Reduce time to market (topic-based information architecture allows you to quickly include or exclude information for a release)
- Improve user experience
- Increase the value of our content assets

Topic-based authoring and forming a narrative

- **List and organize the tasks**

1. What does the user need to do?
2. Identify relationships between the tasks.

- **Add and organize the concepts**

1. What does the user need to understand before performing the tasks?
2. Identify relationships between concepts and tasks.

- **Add the reference topics**

1. What does the user need to refer to when performing the tasks?
2. Organize the reference topics and identify relationships between all of your topics.

The result

