

Writing Tip: Make Your Procedure a Thing of Beauty— Use an Appropriate Format

Adapted from *Writing and Polishing Effective Procedures (WPEP)* seminar

A well-written procedure is a thing of beauty that works flawlessly from beginning to end. Like all great art, you need to:

- Distill everything down to its essence, and remove extraneous, distracting information.
- Strive to make everything in your procedure simple, clear, direct, and complete.
- Use a format that invites your readers to read.

Do you agree with the idea that one way to give a procedure manual a well-organized appearance is to use a consistent format for all procedures? Answer True or False below.

True _____ False _____

The Myth

If you answered True, you agree with 95 percent of the more than 5,000 business professionals we surveyed. The idea of using a consistent format for all procedures is a widely held myth—even among graduates with technical writing degrees and managers of technical documentation departments.

The Myth Buster

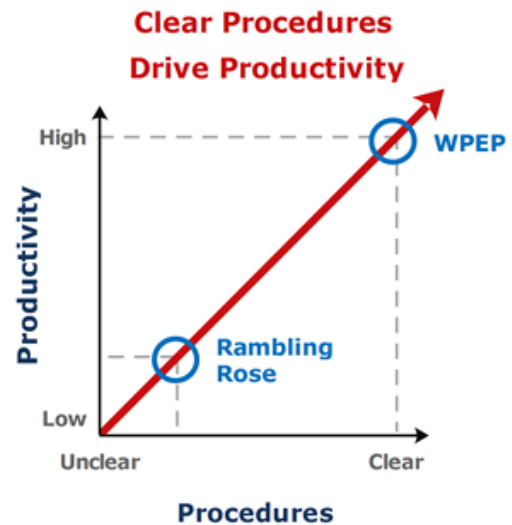
The correct answer is False. Tasks vary, and because written instructions are actually task descriptions, their formats will vary according to the task you are describing. The procedure format, then, is content driven. While a consistent *page layout* is important, that is, type face, headers, footers, page number location, multi-level heading system, and so forth, the appropriate format for all procedures should depend on the juxtaposition of certain elements.

The Essential Question

Users of procedures want to know the answer to one question: “What do I do next?” The format you use should make the answer to this question visually apparent to your users.

The Essential Elements for Appropriate Format Choice

To make your procedure a thing of beauty—and visually apparent to your readers—you need to be clear on the elements of the process you’re describing. You do this in three primary ways:



1. **Consider the flow.** The appropriate format is parallel to the flow of the task:
 - *Is it linear?* Some tasks flow in a simple linear pattern – 1, 2, 3, and so forth. The appropriate format for such an instruction is a linear format.
 - *Is it non-linear?* Other tasks may flow in a nonlinear pattern. Nonlinear tasks require the user to make decisions along the way, and—on the basis of those decisions—choose a different path. These procedures require a nonlinear (branching) format.
2. **Consider the juxtaposition of four other factors.** List all the steps, conditions, doers, and screens (or forms) that interact within the process.
3. **Choose one of 11 formats that best fit the process.**

Example Playscript Procedure Format—Used for linear tasks that require more than one doer to complete. Next month’s Writing Tip will show an excellent format for non-linear procedures.

The Playscript Procedure is a variation of the Step-By-Step format. (Page 86, *Writing & Polishing Effective Procedures*, © 1983-2010 Berry Writing Group, Inc.) In the late 1950s, Leslie H. Matthies developed this format for procedures in his book, *The Playscript Procedure: A New Tool of Administration*.

Here is an abbreviated version of a linear procedure that John James, Washington Navy Yard, wrote last month. This is such a simple solution to what could be a complicated process. Hence, it’s a thing of beauty!

Identification of Career Program Vacancy Position to be Filled

Responsibility	Steps
HRO with Vacancy to be filled	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Send PD to HR Career Program Manager at OCHR 2. Create/Route Request for Personnel Action (RPA) to HRSC 3. Return appropriate paperwork with selection annotated
OCHR Program Manager	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review PD for completeness 2. Forward to central classifier for classification, certification, or establishment
OCHR Classifier/Central Classifier	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Classify PD or review PD as appropriate 2. Signs off on OF-8 as principal classifier
Manager	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Annotate appropriate paperwork with selection 2. Return Selection Certificate to HRO

Make your procedure a thing of beauty. Remember, choosing an appropriate format for each procedure is a crucial to a well-written procedure manual.



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