

# Writing with a Task Orientation

A basic principle of software user assistance is task orientation. The idea is that people use computers to get their work done. They are not much interested in learning or thinking about the technology for its own sake—at least not until their work is finished. Because users see the computer simply as a tool, they want to interact with computers using their own terms and concepts rather than the computer's. They want the support content to—as much as possible—reach out into their world rather than to force them to reach into the world of the computer. They want the support content phrased in terms of actual useful tasks that fulfill their goals. Adjusting the brightness of a clock face fulfills a goal.

The titles of help topics, sections of manuals, and other chunks of support content should certainly reflect a task orientation because the title is the focus and starting point for the rest of the information. Below we see two possible ways in which a set of instructions for an alarm clock might be organized. One is task oriented and one is systems oriented. The systems oriented example reflects the technical design of the alarm clock, the engineer's view of the product, rather than the user's. The task oriented structure is much better.

Note that some tasks are “enabling tasks.” They don't directly fulfill a goal, but they are prerequisites for tasks that fulfill a goal. Users understand that they will also have to learn some enabling tasks. Plugging the alarm clock into an electrical outlet doesn't directly fulfill a goal, but it is clearly an enabling task for everything that an alarm clock enables you to do (other than hitting someone over the head with it).

If this were a radio alarm clock what other tasks would be added to the task hierarchy?

## Task orientation vs. system orientation

<i>Task view of an alarm clock</i>	<i>System view of an alarm clock</i>
<p>Getting it unpacked and plugged in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Removing the shipping tie-downs</li> <li>Plugging in the power cord</li> </ul> <p>Using it as a clock</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Viewing the time</li> <li>Setting the time</li> <li>Adjusting the brightness of the clock face</li> </ul> <p>Using it as an alarm clock</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting the alarm time</li> <li>Setting the alarm to ring</li> <li>Turning off the alarm</li> <li>Activating the snooze feature</li> </ul> <p>Getting protection from a power outage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Installing a battery</li> <li>Monitoring the no-battery installed indicator</li> <li>Monitoring the battery power-on indicator</li> </ul>	<p>Packaging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shipping tie-downs</li> </ul> <p>Power</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AC (power cord)</li> <li>DC (battery)</li> </ul> <p>Internal electronics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>processor</li> <li>peripheral electronics/circuits</li> </ul> <p>Display</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time display</li> <li>Alarm-set display</li> <li>No-battery display</li> <li>AM/PM display</li> </ul> <p>Controls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hour button</li> <li>Minute button</li> <li>Alarm button</li> <li>Time button</li> <li>Alarm on/off switch</li> <li>Snooze lever</li> <li>Illumination adjustment knob</li> </ul>

### ***Exercise: Task vs. product orientation***

There is a simple database product called Address Book. It is intended for use by a broad range of computer users including novices.

Users enter address information for friends, business associates, etc., and then access the addresses they need via several search methods. They can also format address information for printing and print addresses. In addition, they can dial telephone numbers directly from their computer.

The phrases listed below come from the Address Book Help system. Some of these phrases are topic titles; others are sections within topics.

Identify the phrases that are task oriented and those that are systems oriented. Some are in-between.

1. Dialing a phone number
2. Finding information in records
3. Tabbing across fields
4. Printing address information
5. Flipping names
6. Building macros