

Computer programmes:

Thoughts about
Documentation
Handbooks
Manuals

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*These thoughts were evolved during discussions with Alberto Ricci
about ideas for his new Sound Recording programme, but can apply in any situation...*

Sections:

THE 'HIT' LIST

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PALETTES

DOCUMENTATION/
HANDBOOK/
TUTORIAL

why? *file size
and choice of
format*

*paper
and
screen*

resources

desiderata

**THE IMPORTANCE OF
DOCUMENTATION/
HANDBOOK/TUTORIAL**

*it's a
major job*

*orientation
after hyperjumps*

learning

licencing

economics



THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION/ HANDBOOK/TUTORIAL

why?

*I was using one programme for 18 months before I found out that there **was** a keyboard command for one of the most basic functions - and I'd even written to the programmer twice about it...*

Same with digital commands to specify values in numbers rather than dragging the mouse, which I couldn't find because they were called 'exact' rather than 'digital'.

OK, I thought like that because I'd only been using the Mac for a few months when I bought the program, and I hadn't yet learnt the technique of starting by systematically going through all the menu commands, options and preferences...

But I suppose a programme author wants to 'catch' people like that as well as the more-experienced ones... SO...



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THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION/ HANDBOOK/TUTORIAL

desiderata

1. *TUTORIAL*
2. *SECTIONS*
3. *INDEX*
4. *UNDERSTANDING*
 - ◆ *how beginners think*
 - ◆ *the Mac approach*
 - ◆ *people-friendly pedagogics*
 - ◆ *how the program works*
5. *PRESENTATION OF WORDS WHICH ARE NOT STANDARD*
6. *LAYOUT*



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desiderata:

TUTORIAL - SECTIONS - INDEX - UNDERSTANDING - WORDS - LAYOUT

*A: an animated **INTRODUCTORY TOUR** of the main features - like OS8, Photoshop, Claris Works 5, etc; and*

*B: an interactive **TUTORIAL** which presents a basic step-by-step working method for dealing with each of the main tasks the program helps you to do:*

◆ *recording*

◆ *playing*

◆ *editing*

- *basic: length, quality, file-size*

- *modifying: adding effects: creating effects*

- *adding sound to a movie*

◆ *converting format (aiff, wav, sys7, mov)*



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desiderata:

TUTORIAL - SECTIONS - INDEX - UNDERSTANDING - WORDS - LAYOUT

2. *To make sure that the documentation is properly divided up into **SECTIONS**: e.g.*

- / the SoundMaker manual is friendly in style, but overall confusing because you can't tell where you are:*
 - there are only two levels*
 - there are as many as 14 top-level sections (5 is maximum for effective orientation)*
 - sections have as many as 28 subsections, with no grouping...*
 - visually they all run into one another*
 - there doesn't seem to even **be** a simple basic structure behind it all..*

/ the Fontographer manual also has a very friendly style, but the presentation is such a mixture of simplified basics and advanced concepts that it takes hours of frustration to work out even a basic routine for using the program.



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3. An **INDEX** which is *thorough*

- too many indexes are little more than a list of major section headings in alphabetical order:

- and all the Adobe help files I've seen even make a mess of that, and there are section headings which don't turn up in the index!!!!

It also needs to be dynamic - updatable, and users encouraged to contribute words which they looked up in vain...



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desiderata:

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4. *That the documentation is done by someone who*
UNDERSTANDS

- *how beginners think*
- *the Mac approach*
- *people-friendly pedagogics*
- *how the program works*



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4. UNDERSTANDING

- *how beginners think*
 - *establish the level of prior knowledge*
 - *of English*
 - *of using the Mac*
 - *of music - acoustic, electronic, mixed*
 - *of sound*
 - *of recording*
 - *the excited feeling of potential combined with insecurity ...*



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4. UNDERSTANDING

- ◆ *the Mac approach*
 - *user-friendly, intuitive*
 - *cross-program standard commands*

- ◆ *people-friendly pedagogics*
 - *allowing for different learning modes*
 - *visual/auditive/kinesthetic*
 - *jumping/linear*
 - *etc.*



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4. *UNDERSTANDING*

- *how the program works*
 - *the author needs a bit of time to get used to it:*
 - *the demonstrations of Adobes' new products which I've seen are worse than useless, because the guys can't manage the controls properly*



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5. *A very carefully thought-out presentation of all **WORDS WHICH ARE NOT STANDARD** in everyday language - both new words, and standard words used in non-standard ways.*

I've worked in traditional recording studios, radio TV for many years, and still don't understand 80% of what people write on the SoundMaker discussion list...



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6. LAYOUT

*- That you can **read the text AND see the sections** at the same time on any standard screen:*

most eDoc manuals I've used have not considered this aspect, and it doubles the amount of energy you use to find out something.

For example:

- Acrobat help does work in this respect:*
- iView help doesn't.*



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paper and screen

It's not essential that it's printed on paper: you could provide a version for the user to print, in Acrobat/PDF - or indeed ClarisWorks, since it's Mac-only... BUT you DO need a version 'dedicated' for screen use - trying to scroll individual 'vertical A4' pages on-screen is a stupid misuse of time and energy.

*If your new thing is to complete effectively with SoundMaker and other alternatives, I guess you really would need **something** printed: and if that **were** a possibility, the most important would be an overview and tutorial - it need only be around 20 pages and say one color, like Apple's Internet Connection Kit for example:*

- as a new owner it's very exciting to read through something like that in the sofa, on the train, in the loo...*
- but for looking up details while you're using the program - on-line help is fine, and sometimes even better.*



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major job

*Of course it's a **MAJOR JOB** to do it properly, but that's no reason for neglecting it.*

If you don't have the time for more than the basics, I would be interested in working with you on the presentation and human side of it.

I think you know that my main field of work is human-friendly pedagogics based on a musical approach, and I've made a close study and comparison of how computer help files are made, and work or don't work - in several hundred programs, I suppose, covering text, image handling, animation, multimedia, fonts, personal managers, utilities ...

I've worked with Peter Hoerster in Germany on the CopyPaste documentation, and the next job is with his iType.



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*learning from
the dark side*

Although I'm a strong Mac-evangelist, it does no good to close your eyes to the few strengths which the opposition has

- on the contrary, it makes sense to learn from the dark side, to improve the Mac

- and by comparison with Windows help, both the technology of the Apple Guide system and the pedagogics of the Macintosh help files are clumsy and ineffective, and we can do a lot better...



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*orientation after
hyperjumps*

There's also a serious problem in many on-line help files:

*if you come from the world of books, discovering hyperlinks
is a wonderful liberation*

*- but the habit of thinking linearly and in hierarchical sections
dies hard, and it's very disorientating when you hyperjump
to a section if you can't see the context of where you've landed.*

*Rod Lawton's articles in MacFormat, for example, have
this well sewn-up, but the authors of most QuickHelp
files haven't thought enough about it and leave you very
confused...*



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file size and choice of format

I haven't specifically compared the footprint of -help- files in different formats for similar content, but in general I haven't found anything to touch Acrobat, which can reduce a PageMaker file by about 20 times... Some examples:

- using **QuickHelp** format: you have to add 1.5 Mb for the player:

*Photoshop = 12 Mb + 1.5 Mb for the reader = **13.5 Mb***

*Claris Works, Director 5 = 3.5 + 1.5 = **5 Mb***

*Claris Me@iler = 2 + 1.5 = **3.5 Mb***

*FreeHand = 1.6 + 1.5 = **3.5 Mb***

- using **PDF** format (user downloads Acrobat Reader)

*Acrobat = **6 Mb** (lots of different sections, graphics)*

*Claris Home Page = **2 Mb***

- using **eDoc** format

*iView = **350K** (mostly text, very few images)*

*CopyPaste, iType = **100K** (mostly text, very few images)*



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*file size and
choice of format*

Of course, shareware authors normally use eDoc or PageBoy, while the other formats are used by larger companies: but- I don't see why that need be so - there's no licencing fee for distributing a PDF document...

- I suppose if you want your new program to be taken seriously, it should seem more like a commercial one and less like a shareware...???



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*That's more than enough for now - it's
taken all day...*

*Hope there's something useful
there...*

All best wishes,

David



*The section you clicked on was part
of the original document from which
this was extracted*

*- it's not part of this extract, but it
was to much work to redesign the
whole thing...*

BACK