International Association of Penturners

Introduction

The object of writing a tutorial is to convey specific information to another person, so that they can accomplish similar results. It is a form of teaching by means of the written word. You know how to do something, and you want to tell somebody else how to do it! In this short article I hope to show you how easy it is to write a tutorial. We'll choose an objective, develop an outline, flesh out the article, learn to edit our article, and add visual aids.

The Objective

Tutorials, and other types of writing to inform, should be clear, concise, and non-threatening. But tutorials have the additional requirement of teaching specific processes so that identical results can be obtained. A good place to start writing a tutorial is to identify what process you want to teach, write it down on paper or create a document on your computer. Save the document on your computer often. If I want to teach someone how to turn a Slimline pen, I might title it as: *How to turn a Slimline Pen*

Develop an Outline

The next step is to identify and write down the key points of the process you want to teach. Often it is easiest to imagine yourself at the beginning of the process and think your way through to the completion of the process. As you imagine yourself going through the process, write down the steps you go through. For example:

- Purchase pen kit.
- Choose a pen blank.
- Measure and cut the pen blank.
- Drill the pen blank.
- Glue the tube into the blank.
- Trim the blank.
- Turn the blanks.
- Sand the blanks.
- Finish the blanks.

When you have written down the general steps in your process, you will have completed what is called a rough outline. The outline is the "bones" of the article you are trying to write. You don't need to include every little step or action at this point but be sure you hit all the main points. Your outline is not set in stone, you can edit and change it as the article progresses.

The next step in writing your tutorial is to expand your outline to include the actions that result in accomplishing each of the main steps. For example, the main step of "Measure and cut the pen blank" could include a number of minor steps to accomplish the main objective, such as "Measure the brass tubes" and "Cut the blank 1/8" longer than the brass tube". As you think your way through the process, write down the steps you go through.

- o Measure and cut the pen blank.
- o Measure the brass tubes.
- o Cut the blank 1/8" longer than the brass tube.
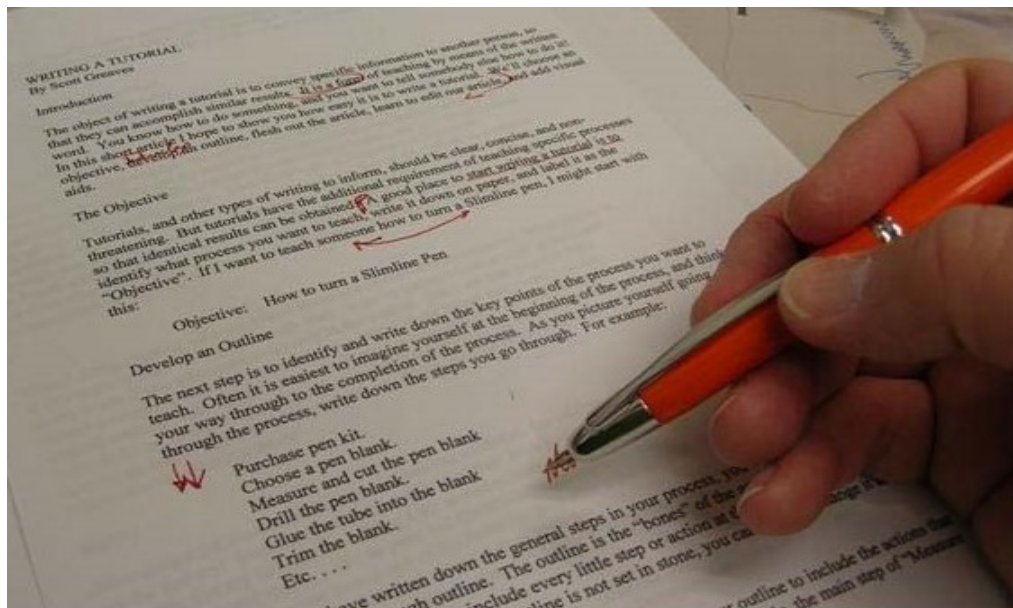- o Etc. . . .

Flesh out the Article

So far all we have is a list of steps, and not even a description of how to perform each step. Now you need to flesh out the tutorial by writing a description of the process you use to accomplish each step. This is where the real writing begins, and it is where a lot of people opt out of the writing process. They think writing a description is hard or impossible for them to do. But this is a process you know how to do, and all you have to do is share that with somebody else. What helps me is to imagine that I am talking to my best friend, a friend that has just asked me to help them make a pen. As penturners we love these kinds of requests! I just write down what I would be saying to them about the process of making a pen, just as if we were standing in front of the lathe together.

Wasn't it fun, chatting with our friend about one of our favorite subjects? What you have at this point is what we'll call a rough draft. Start by taking a look at your outline and check to see if you addressed every step in the outline. Odds are that you will have missed a couple of steps, and you will have talked about things that weren't in the original outline. Take the time to go back and include an explanation of the outline steps that you forgot to include before, and to add the steps to the outline that came out of your rough draft. Think of the outline as a roadmap, and the rough draft is your first telling of a wonderful journey!

Editing

Now comes the most important part of writing a tutorial, the editing. Nobody gets it right on the first try! Everybody reads through what they have just written and makes changes. On my first pass at editing I try to concentrate on mechanical things like misspellings and typos. I like to print the article and correct by hand. Of course, this also gives me an excuse to use one of my fountain pens with a fun color of ink! And by thinking of what I term mechanical errors, I disengage my brain from the actual wording of what I have just written, and subconsciously I begin to work out some of the rough spots in my wording.

After making the corrections to my typing, I print out a new revision, sit back, and read it out loud to myself. The act of verbalizing what I wrote sometimes points out just how poorly I have written something and helps me to set it right by sounding it out to myself.

Styles

This is probably a good place to talk about styles. It is obvious that I prefer a light conversational style. But you need to write in a style that is comfortable to you. Don't try to bend your style to that of somebody else. Enjoy yourself, and just put the words down the way you would if you were talking. If you have to write to target a specific audience, much of that can be accomplished with editing. Most penturners are a lot like you and will do just fine if you explain things in your own "voice".

At this point in the editing process, you may be too close to the document to successfully catch any remaining problems. One thing you can do is to have somebody else read it and give you comments on it. What I often do at this point is to set the article aside for a few hours, possibly even a few days, and then see if it sounds the same to me after this time.
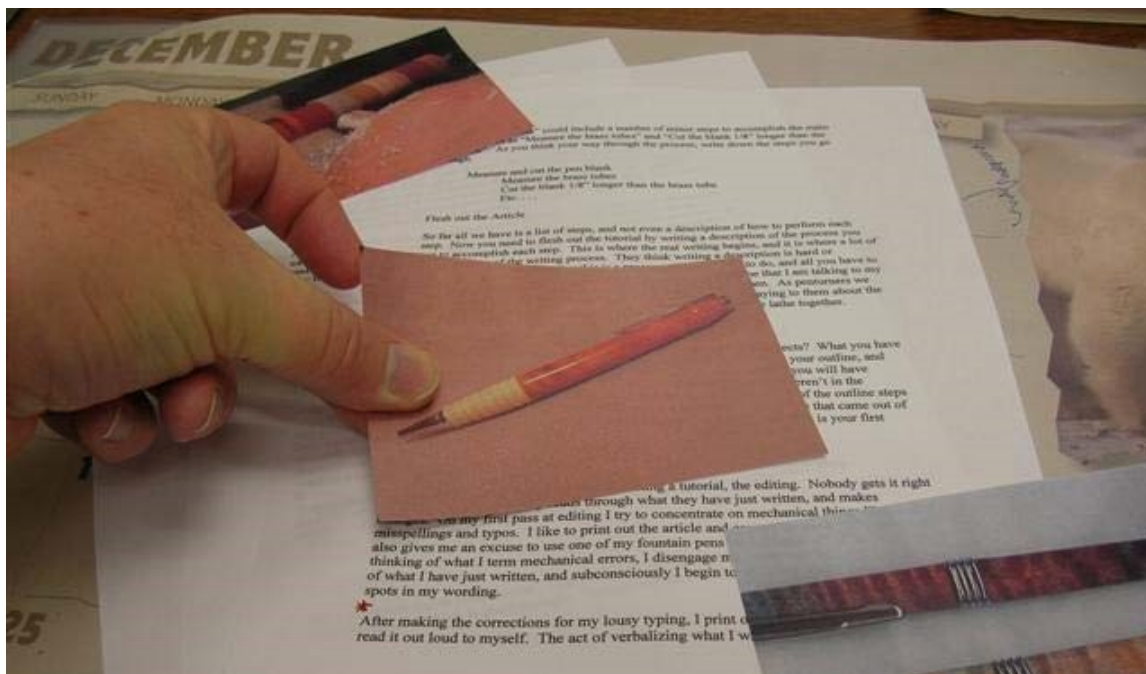
This is also a good point to structure the document as an informative article. It helps to start with an introduction to the subject matter, and you should also provide an ending that summarizes the process in a neat package. As they say in the writing classes, tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them what you just told them. An introduction and a summary are great ways to bring an informative article into focus.

Images

The next step is to incorporate images. As much as we all like to believe that everyone is hanging on our every word, the fact is that almost no one will read each word of your article. Most people do a lot of skimming, and what catches their eye are things like images, diagrams, charts, and topic headings. So go back through your article and look for places where these would benefit the most. With a your tutorial, you should include actual images of your construction that will enhance the telling of the story. The inclusion of these items is what makes the reader want to stop for a moment and read what you have to say.

With today's cell phones, you can easily capture and edit images. Transfer them to your computer to incorporate them in your tutorial. Review the image and edit any of the extraneous areas of the images.

You're almost done! It's time to read through the article one last time. Make sure everything flows together and is appropriate to the process. Add images only if they relate to what you're saying. Check to make sure the article is welcoming, and visually appealing. This often involves breaking large paragraphs into smaller blocks, which adds more white space to the article.

Time to Finish

Now it is time to finish your tutorial. This is where I remind myself of the old adage: Sometimes good enough is good enough! You can edit an article to death. You must choose a point and just stop. I usually edit an article three times at most. If I haven't caught a mistake by then, I probably won't, and it just muddies up the wording if I keep trying. Just write what you want to say, and then leave well enough alone.

Summary

Writing a tutorial can be a fun process, especially when you're writing about something you enjoy! And it can be easy as well, especially if you stick to a formula. Figure out what the objective of your article is, develop an outline of the major steps, and then add in the smaller steps that reveal some of the details. Flesh out the article by describing the steps in your outline. Then carefully edit your article so it flows smoothly and looks good, including whatever visual aids needed to help the story telling. I hope I have helped this to become not only an easy task, but also an enjoyable one!

Finally submit your tutorial to the Library Manager. libman@penturners.org Your document will then be reviewed by the Library Manager, placed on the standard IAP form and added to the Library Menu.