

## The Potato Procedure: *How* and *Why* Styles of Writing A Technical Documentation Note

How do you balance procedural writing and conceptual writing in your technical manuals? Procedural writing explains *how* to perform a task. Conceptual writing explains *why* to perform the task. The following examples illustrate the *how* and *why* writing styles.

### Peeling Potatoes (Version A)

To peel the potatoes, follow this procedure:

1. Grasp a potato in your left hand.
2. Hold the peeler in your right hand.
3. Moving the peeler in short, quick motions, scrape the peel from the potato and expose the white.
4. Use the potato right away.
5. Repeat steps 1-4 for all the other potatoes.

### Peeling Potatoes (Version B)

One of the most nutritious parts of a potato is the peel. The peel is rich in vitamin B and other nutrients, and it's also the most flavorful part of the potato. Many people like to eat the peel, and if you are one of them, you can cook with unpeeled potatoes.

It is true, though, that the peel looks ugly to our Western eyes, and some people don't like the taste. Often, too, the peel is dirty and it can be hard to clean. If you prefer to peel your potatoes, follow this procedure:

1. Grasp the peeler and potato in your hands.
2. Scrape the peel from the potato and expose the white.

When you have finished peeling, you should try to use the potato right away. If you leave a peeled potato exposed to the air for an hour or two, it may turn brown and lose some of its flavor.

### Discussion

What have I accomplished with version A? I have told the reader how to perform a mechanical task. Version A is best if the reader knows why to perform the task, but doesn't know how.

What have I accomplished with version B? I have explained the pros and cons of the task. I have taught the reader why and when to perform the task. But I haven't provided detailed instructions. I've assumed that the task is simple, so only minimal instructions are required.

In the case of potatoes, I think that version B is clearly more appropriate than version A. Evidence: my 7-year-old daughter knows how to peel potatoes. But she doesn't do it until her mother tells her. She doesn't know why.

Although version A seems simpler than version B, it may actually be harder to understand. Instructions such as *moving the peeler in short, quick motions* are confusing. The instructions on what to hold in your right or left hand are wrong for left-handed readers. If the readers need this level of detail, a picture is preferable to the verbal instructions.

Of course, I am not advocating the *why* style for all technical writing. For complex or unfamiliar tasks, the *how* style is often required. The choice depends on the background of the readers, the complexity of the tasks, and the level of understanding that the readers need to achieve.