

Script Writing for Video Tutorials



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As technical communicators, the ability to step out of the box and write in non-traditional environments is truly a job requirement as we enter the second decade of the 21st century. It seems as though technological advancements breed more technological advancements. In previous generations, the technical communication community could use several years of experience, lessons learned, and “best practices” to solidify ourselves as experts and to measure the quality of our work. But, at the

current speed of change, we now often find ourselves embarking on a new journey—not a road less traveled, but a road we’re traveling together. A road where there isn’t an expert to turn to. And, a road that is not paved with a set of instructions to follow.

This article is not meant to serve as an extensive user guide for any screen capture software, nor will it provide step-by-step information or methodologies for producing video tutorials. Its purpose is to get your video production skills moving in the right direction as your role evolves from manual or help writer to well-rounded technical communicator in today’s market.

Pre-Planning Dos and Don’ts

In organizations in which video tutorial production is a new team endeavor, some managers mistakenly believe that the resident technical communicator “can be brought in just to write the script” and be left out of everything else. You’ll quickly see why this isn’t the case—and cannot be the case. Here’s a list of pre-planning dos and don’ts to consider before you begin writing your video script:

- **Don’t** create a video (or multiple videos) around where to find a button or menu item.
- **Don’t** include information in your video describing what action(s) will occur by clicking a button or selecting a menu item.
- **Do** include information around where to find buttons and menu items and what they do using text and screen shots. This kind of information is better displayed, received, and referenced by the user in text. No viewer will want to take the time to execute a video and watch for even 60 seconds if they can reference a guide in 10 seconds.
- **Don’t** plan video tutorials that last longer than two to three minutes. Viewers want information fast. They are using your video tutorial for a specific reason, or for a piece of information.
- **Do** expect to plan features and benefits videos, or demonstrations for sales and marketing purposes, to be longer. Take attention span into consideration.
- **Do** expect that if *you* watch your video



“Your script needs a beginning, middle, and **END.**”

and get bored within the first 60 to 90 seconds, the viewer will, too.

- **Do** understand that it’s acceptable to “video-size” only parts of concepts or topics, and then refer the viewer to additional texts or screen shots for information.
- **Do** understand that it’s acceptable to create multiple videos for longer tasks or more complex topics. Make sure you can provide information describing the different parts to the viewer prior to beginning the video tutorial.
- **Do** include supporting text outside of the video. Beyond help documentation and text tutorials that the video tutorials support, provide information like:
 - Descriptive title
 - Short summary (in order of sequence in which information will be presented)
 - Video length
 - Predicted audience (who should view the video)
 - Prerequisites (what should the viewer know, read, or view before watching this video)

It’s tempting to include this information on the first couple of slides of the video itself. Beware of falling into that trap! By providing the information as text outside of the video, you are decreasing the amount of time the user will have to spend watching the video and assisting the user in deciding if watching the video will be beneficial to the task at hand. Plus, if you are concerned with search engine optimization, this is a great way to get parsed by search engines.

Writing Tips to Get You on Your Way

Once you have selected the concepts or tasks for your video(s), it’s time to get to what will probably be your favorite part: the writing. Although video tutorial script writing is similar to writing help documentation and text tutorials, there are some important considerations. Here are some tips to get your writing started.

Start by writing a three- to five-sentence summary of the video. This will help you stay within the purpose and scope of the video. If the summary changes while you’re writing, take a step back and make sure you’re not over-complicating the tutorial, and that the new summary is still in line with the other guidelines in this article.

Logically break the two- to three-minute video into two to five smaller sections that can be divided with a transition slide. If the video tutorial is demonstrating a task, this can easily be done by breaking it up into steps (i.e., Step 1, Step 2, Step 3). This will begin to organize your script into an outline and allow you to efficiently and effectively focus on high-quality script writing.

Just like a movie, your script needs a beginning, middle, and end. However, remember that this is not a feature film. Quickly tell the viewer what you’re going to tell them, correctly and adequately, and then tell the viewer what you told them. Just like a text tutorial or other help documentation, some introduction and some conclusion are useful. Be careful not to waste your viewers’ time with background information or information that’s not pertinent to their successful completion of the video. As with

written text, the user can simply skip the introduction and conclusion if they want.

Getting the Job Done

Setting Up the Script

As the technical communicator, it's your role in script writing to tell the video recorder what to record, to tell the speaker what the audio should say, and to tell the video editor how it should all fit together. This is most effectively done using one document rather than trying to maintain information in several places.

Create references for each role to effectively communicate what should be recorded, said, edited, and applied. Because your script will include instructions to multiple people—or people acting in multiple roles—and because planning and integration is extremely important to the quality of the final video, you can effectively manage your script and script-writing responsibilities by creating a simple table and filling in the blanks. The columns to include are:

- Row ID (to be used in conjunction with the video editor and voice recorder/speaker—this should be numbered starting with 1 and continued sequentially for every row in the table)
- Steps/Scenario (for the video recorder)
- Slide Number (to be used later by the video editor)
- Audio (for the voice recorder/speaker)
- Caption Text (for the video editor)

This will create references for the actual video recorder, voice recorder/speaker, and video editor (even if you're the one playing all three roles), so it's clear which voice is applicable to which slide created.

Remember, with video screen capture software, the final output looks like a movie. Technically speaking, the software captures several screen shots while you are in recording mode and plays the screen shots one after another. From a video production and video editing perspective, you will be applying audio files, captions, and so forth to individual slides. This is similar to a PowerPoint presentation, and it might be helpful to write your script as if you are planning such a presentation.



“Write how people talk, not how they write.”

Writing the Recording Script

You should always start by writing the steps the video recorder should follow. This is the simplest part for someone with experience writing help documentation and text tutorials: outlining the steps sequentially for the video recorder to follow while recording the video.

The biggest difference between writing the steps for video tutorial production and writing the steps in help documentation or text tutorials is that you must provide a level of detail to the video recorder that includes a complete working scenario. For example, if you create a video tutorial about entering data from a form into a software tool, you must provide the video recorder with the information to enter into all the fields on-screen. This will ensure that your video recorder is able to follow all the steps with the outcome you expected.

If you don't provide this kind of information, the video recorder could become confused and go off track from the script while trying to interpret what you planned for them to record. This is

an important step, even if *you'll* be taking on the role of the video recorder. If you accidentally click the wrong button or enter information into the wrong field while recording, you may have to re-record sections of the video, or restart your recording from scratch. Including the steps and a complete working scenario is an important part of the planning process and helps ensure a high-quality final video. Insert this information into the “Steps/Scenario” column of your video script. You should include one step per row (e.g., Row 1: Click the Save button).

Writing the Audio Script

The next step is to write the audio piece of the script. You should include the text for the audio in the same row as the step in which the audio is relevant.

Don't write too much audio content on each slide. Remember, audio actually significantly increases the length of the entire video because the video does not move forward to the next slide until the audio is over. The audio for each slide should be no longer than one to two sentences. If you have more to say, most video screen-capturing software will allow you to duplicate a slide (with or without the action and captions associated with it) and you could potentially apply one to two additional sentences of audio. This rule is also appreciated by the voice recorder/speaker. It's easier to record one to two sentences and save the audio file than to try to record an entire paragraph. Speakers may fumble over their words or read something incorrectly; if so, they'll have to re-record the audio file. Fewer words in each audio file will result in less rework for the speaker.

When writing the audio script, write how people talk, not how they write. This is one of the hardest transitions from help documentation and text tutorial writing to video tutorial writing; it's not what you're familiar with. Write the text for the audio, and then read it aloud and ask yourself: “If I were to verbally tell someone this, how would I say it?” However, be aware of regional language and who the audience will be. For example, if you're from the southern part of the

United States, you might use the word “y’all” habitually; if you’re from Australia, you might be tempted to end the video with “cheers.” This is regional language and you should be careful to exclude it for global audiences or audiences from different regions to increase clarity. That said, unlike technical writing, the use of contractions such as “don’t” and “can’t” is not only acceptable but recommended when writing text for audio. It sounds more natural, and it is more common in speech to use contractions.

Remember that you’re not writing a technical manual. You don’t have to create audio for every action the screen will display (i.e., Click the Save button). The viewer can see what’s going on and doesn’t need to be told. In fact, viewers report that it’s annoying when the speaker describes every single action as they are taking it. Use the audio to provide additional information or to drive home an important point.

Plan for silence. Think of silence as leaving white space in your document. You don’t need constant speaking (although you don’t want silences that feel more like dead air than natural pauses). Also, music is not effective, and can even be distracting, in technical video tutorials, with the possible exception of the introduction and conclusion if no voice-over audio will be presented at that time.

Writing Captions

The next column to complete in your script table is for the captions.

Use captions as supplemental text to the audio. Do not use more than one sentence per caption. Some screen capturing tools will automatically insert captions. Automatic captions will be directly related to the actions taken on the screen. Your captions may be related to the actions taken on-screen or provide some other kind of information. You can include more than one caption per slide, but you must plan in order to arrange them so they appear sequentially and with the right timing relevant to the audio and action taking place on-screen.

Write your captions well enough to accurately and completely summarize the audio. Remember that not every viewer



“Think of silence as using white space in your document.”

will have access to headphones or speakers. You should not provide additional information in your caption that is not provided to the viewer through the audio or that is describing an action taking place on the screen. It can be too much for the viewer to keep up with if they are trying to see the mouse movements on-screen, listen to the audio, and read the caption at the same time—particularly if the information from all three doesn’t complement each other and provides new or different information.

Next Steps

At this point, the writing exercise is basically over for your video tutorial script. Once the script is complete, the next activities for high-quality video production are to use the video script you created as follows:

1. The video recorder should follow the Steps/Scenario column to record the video.
2. The voice recorder/speaker should record the voice files (usually MP3s) and save one file per row in the script table. The voice recorder/speaker should make the file name consistent

with the Row ID to easily communicate to the video editor which slides to apply the audio files.

3. The video editor should run through the entire video along with the script and fill in the Slide Number column. Typically, when recording the video, the screen capture software will create more or fewer slides than you expected while planning. This is to be expected. For example, your action may be to select a menu item, but the screen capture software may create a slide to move the mouse to the main menu, click the main menu item, move the mouse to the submenu item, and finally select the submenu item—all of which would create more slides than the one row you probably planned for. The screen capturing software will apply a number to each slide. The video editor should insert the slide number applicable into the correct row. (Note: There will not be one row per slide. Some slides will not have audio or captions.)
4. The video editor should apply the correct voice file to the correct slide.
5. The video editor should create/modify the correct caption(s) to the correct slide.

Change is inevitable. Due to the evolution of your role as a technical communicator, there will be roads less traveled—roads where we must pave the way together, make mistakes, and learn lessons for future generations. With the technology and software available today, simply recording a video tutorial is an easy job. But, to provide *successful* videos, it’s important to take the same planning and analysis into consideration as with any other technical documentation. Now, it’s time to test your script writing skills. Good luck paving the road. **1**

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