
The Importance of User Message Text and Why Professional Writers Should Be Involved

A Critical Review

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Paper and slides can be found at:

<http://www.dcs.shef.ac.uk/~u7mag/com306/>

Aims of this Presentation

- **Introduction**
 - Summary of paper
 - Justification for study
- **Definitions**
 - What are technical writers?
 - What are user messages?
- **Research Method**
 - How was study carried out?
 - Who was involved?
- **Results**
 - Costs to Organisations
 - Error Messages
 - Summary of Results
- **Message Positioning**
- **Marking the Paper**
- **Conclusion**

The DOS Error Message

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Not ready reading drive A
Abort, Retry, Fail?f
Current drive is no longer valid>
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10 Variations on a Single Sentence

- List programmers department managers supervise.
- What programmers work for department managers?
- List programmers working for department managers.
- List any programmers department managers supervise.
- List each programmer a department manager supervises.
- Which programmers work for managers of departments?
- Which of the programmers work for department managers?
- List every programmer supervised by a department manager.
- List programmers with supervisors who manage departments.
- Who are all of the programmers working for department managers?

7000 Variations on a Single Sentence

- Hewlett-Packard Natural Language Project
- Written in 1986

- Consider a database which uses a command language designed to resemble natural language
- Which of the 7000 variations would you use?

Technical Writers

- Technical Communicator is a subset of Technical Writers.
- Role is to explain complex, technical ideas in a simple fashion so that the users of the technology concerned can easily understand them.
- Skills
 - audience analysis
 - writing skills
 - layout/illustration
 - graphics
 - interviewing

The Research

- Questionnaire and taped interviews.
- Total of 99 people questioned
 - 22 developers
 - 11 technical communicators
 - 66 users
- Questions asked:
 - Rank 9 items concerning software systems (e.g., meaningful error messages, ease of use) in order of importance.
 - Score statements regarding the quality of error messages out of 5.
 - Possibly others...

Costs to Organisations

The cost of badly written user messages, to organisations can be summarised as follows:

- Increased calls to the help desk or programming team.
- User frustration, leading to reduced productivity and often resentment of the system.
- Productivity is lowered, as users have to spend time trying to figure out the solution to the error message.
- Productivity of other users is reduced as the user seeks help from his / her peers.
- Increased error rate, as users often ignore messages they do not understand.

User Messages

- Error Messages
 - The written style of the message
 - Messages written in technical jargon
 - The messages provide little guidance
- System Status Messages
 - Lack of information provided
 - Users react inappropriately because of a lack of status messages
 - Inaccurate messages
 - Poorly worded messages

Summary of Results

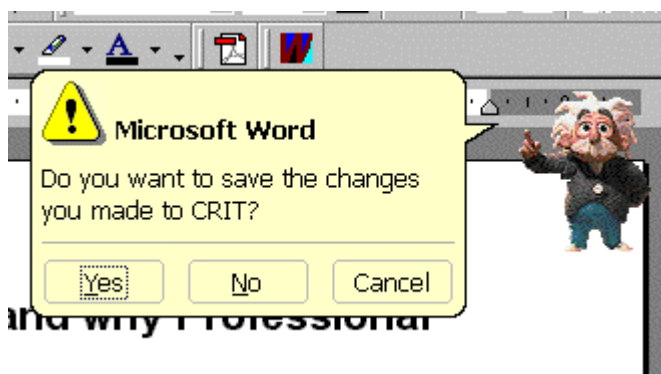
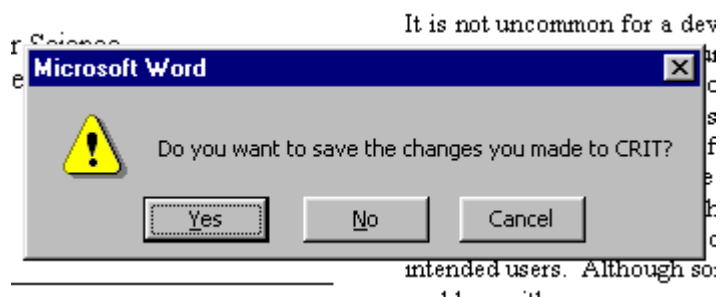
- Users rate meaningful error messages fourth highest when asked what makes a system easy to use.
- 36% of all users make negative comments about error messages, this is more negative comments than are levelled at any other part of a software system.
- Developers under estimate the difficulties users have with error messages.
- Developers see the writing of user messages as a job that could be completed by technical writers.
- Currently only about 20% of systems being developed have any input from technical writers.
- Employing technical writers should make systems easier to use and may, therefore save organisations money.

Message Positioning

The paper briefly mentions the fact that the positioning of user messages can affect the users performance. She states that messages should be placed consistently, and in the window in which the user is currently working.

We have found at least one piece of software that ignores this suggestion, Microsoft® Office2000.

- standard Windows style message
- always positioned in the same place



- different style to standard messages
- can (and does!) appear in different places

Our Marking Scheme

We decided to rate the paper against the following categories giving a mark out of 5 for each category.

- Impact of Introduction / Abstract: **3/5**
- Research Method: **4/5**
- Summing Up: **5/5**
- Practicality: **5/5**
- Presentation: **1/5**

Total Mark for paper is: 18/25

Our Conclusions

- The role of professional writers is not clearly defined
- The results of the study are not presented in a coherent fashion.
- The style of the paper meant that it was not easy to follow.
- An appendix containing the questionnaires asked and the results obtained would have been useful.