

ROI Learning's Professional Guidelines Series

How to Write Instructional Articles

By

Herbert L. Bivens

Principal Consultant
ROI Learning Services

Abstract: Instructional articles are very different from articles in reference manuals, product brochures, or even professional literature. This guide defines instructional articles and describes how to write them

Prior to learning to perform certain job-related tasks or to sell a product solution, students need to learn specific knowledge about the tasks and perhaps the features and benefits of the product solution. Traditionally, in many training programs this knowledge transfer occurs in the classroom through the time honored instructional method called "lecture".

Lectures are typically delivered by knowledgeable individuals who explain their expertise to the audience. Depending upon their lecture style, the time spent can be quite rewarding or it can seem like an "information dump" which buries the audience in too much detail and not enough relevancies.

For self-paced courses, on-line or web-based training, instructional articles are the preferred instructional method to be used in place of the lecture. An instructional article is a short and concise document conveying relevant, critical information to support concepts, procedures, and/or performance-based skills. The instructional article is written specifically to enable learning to occur.

Key to the learning success of instructional articles are two words in the above definition: relevant and critical. As you are developing course content, ask yourself, what types of information and knowledge will the learner need to comprehend a concept or to later perform a certain task or skill. Remember the old instructional design distinction between "need to know" and "nice to know." Learners will only be attentive to self-paced instruction if the content is relevant to them and they see the knowledge as critical to their master of the desired skill. Save the "nice to know" material for the web site reference section.

Follow these specific content guidelines when creating instructional articles:

- Each instructional article must support the learning objectives/goals of the course – same as any other instructional method being used.
- Get the learner’s attention immediately by clearly making the topic relevant to something important within the learner’s frame of reference, i.e., job, studies, professional development.
- The body of the article must have:
 - An introductory paragraph,
 - One or more explanatory paragraphs, and
 - A summary paragraph.
- The body of the article may also contain questions or other interactive activities, such as exercises, problem-solving situations, or short simulations
- Always keep the instructional article to one or two main ideas or concepts.
- Use only the most important “need-to-know” supporting detail.
- When it’s possible, support the article content with audio and/or video clips containing relevant information, such as “how to’s” or examples that help further clarify key learning points. Embed a link to the audio or video clip within the article or have the links set aside in a menu next to the article

Organize the structure and navigation of an instructional article to enable the learner to read and review the instructional content in a short time as well as take advantage of any links, graphics, or animation that supports learning the content. Follow these simple guidelines to ensure the right structure and navigation:

- Minimize the need for the learner to scroll through text. When instructional article is printed it should be no longer than 3 pages using a 12 point font.
- Use only graphics, diagrams, or pictures which lend meaning and clarification to the topic. (In some cases graphics can also be used to get the learner’s attention, but these should not be overused or their effectiveness will diminish and the learner will consider them an annoying distraction.)
- For ease of navigation, at the end of an instructional article display a link to the next article or interactive exercise. Also, a link to the main course menu should be available on every page.
- Hyperlink all key words, phrases and/or concepts within the instructional article to some type of glossary or reference providing for definitions and additional clarification as needed by the learner

Using these simple guidelines for content, structure, and navigation will enable you to create sound instructional articles and enable your web-based training to

successfully support the transfer of learning no matter what type of information the learner needs.

About the Author:



Herbert L. Bivens is a pioneer in the use of technology to improve the design, development, and delivery of learning programs. He has many years of diverse, successful experience in training and performance improvement. Herb's specific areas of expertise include process improvement, instructional technology, consulting, performance technology, e-learning, and adult learning theory. Herb is a Principal Consultant at ROI Learning Services and can be reached via email at herb@roi-learning.com.