

User Experience – Book Review Guidelines

(August 8, 2005)

What to review:

- Books being reviewed should have a focus or potential influence on user experience, usability, or design effectiveness. In addition to books specifically about usability, this may include books on business, human perceptions, psychology, sociology, for example, as long as you make it clear why it is relevant to the readers of *User Experience*.
- Review books that are published recently or soon to be published.

Review copies:

- If you are aware of a book that is soon to be published or recently published on a relevant topic and you would like to review it, contact our Book Review Editor: Tema Frank at tema@webmysteryshoppers.com . Include the information on the attached **Book Review Request form**.
- If possible provide the full title, author name, publisher, anticipated (or actual) publication date, and ISBN number. We will then contact the publisher to request a review copy.
- Your payment for writing a review is that you get to keep the review copy of the book. We will also credit you as the author of the review.

Deadlines & Length:

- Aim for a word length of 1000 – 1500 words. We will do minor editing, and will contact you to discuss changes if we feel that the review requires major editing.
- Once you have committed to a deadline for submitting your review, please meet it! If you realize you might not be able to meet it, tell us right away, so we can try to find other content to fill that space.
- If you get part way through the book and conclude that it is awful, let us know right away. If it is by a big-name author, we may choose to run a negative review (as long as you can justify your views). If it is from an unknown author, we'll probably decide to skip the review.

Book Review Request Form – User Experience Magazine

Please complete the following form and submit it, in the body of your e-mail or as an attachment, with your request to review the book. E-mail it to:

tema@webmysteryshoppers.com .

Reviewer's Name:

Reviewer's job and/or other relevant experience:

Reviewer's phone number: 1

Reviewer's e-mail address:

Reviewer's mailing address (so we can have the publisher send you a copy):

Book Name:

Book's Author:

Publisher:

Publication date (if known):

ISBN number (if known):

Why it may be relevant to UX readers:

Legalities:

- By submitting your review to *User Experience*, you represent that the review is your own work, that it is original to *User Experience*, and that it is unencumbered by any existing or anticipated contractual relationship; further, you are granting *User Experience* permission to publish your review, including any editing the *User Experience* editorial team finds necessary and appropriate. (Major edits will involve consultation by email or other means.) If you've reviewed the book elsewhere anywhere besides a personal home page (for instance, on Amazon) please be sure that your review for *User Experience* is substantially different.
- **Important: If you have a relationship (other than as an ordinary reader) to the author or publisher of a book you're reviewing, disclose that relationship.** That will not normally disqualify you from writing the review, but it may be relevant enough that you need to mention your relationship to the author or publisher in the review.

How to write a book review: (Note: What follows is excerpted from Slashdot's advice to its book reviewers. <http://slashdot.org/book.review.guidelines.shtml> Why re-invent the wheel?)

Think and sketch: Take notes on the book you're dissecting, and decide how you want to approach your review. Remember that things which may be clear with the book in front

of you won't necessarily be obvious to a reader who has only the review to go on. Here are some questions which may help you formulate a non-fiction review:

- What is the book about? What is the scope?
- How gracefully do you expect the content to age? If reviewing an updated / revised book (and you have access to the previous edition), in what ways do the revisions add to or detract from the book?
- Is the title accurate? (i.e. Does *Introduction to BingoWidgets For Novices* serve as an adequate explanation of BingoWidgets to the average reader with no experience? Or do you find that in actuality, a working acquaintance is practically necessary to understand even the introduction?) This is usually worth noting only if the title is for some reason *not* a good match for the text -- for instance, if it seriously under- or overstates the book's content.
- What level of experience is needed to well use the information in the book? Who will find it most useful? Is there an existing, canonical book which already covers the same ground?
- Is the book readable as well as technically accurate? Is the language stilted, or natural? Are examples easy to follow?
- Is the book illustrated? Are the illustrations appropriate and well executed?
- Do any extras come with the book, like a CD-ROM of additional information or code samples? How helpful are they?
- What's missing from the book? Would it benefit from illustrations, a better index, a final chapter on practical applications?

If reviewing a technical book, begin by introducing things gently.

- What is a Relational Database Applications Framework Management System Defrobnoindicator, and what does one eat? Don't dive straight into jargon and buzzwords without stopping to say what they mean. Likewise, avoid eccentric spelling and capitalization unless there is a compelling reason to use it.
- What hardware and software does the author assume readers will be dealing with? (If this book is about software, what operating systems are dealt with? If it's about hacking into a proprietary video game console, will it work only with certain production runs' output?) Don't assume that everyone is running Microsoft Windows on an Intel-based desktop computer, or Debian GNU/Linux on a solar-powered home-brewed wristwatch -- be as specific as makes sense.
- If the book is about software, under what license or licenses is the software released? How much does it cost? (And are licensing and pricing consistent among supported platforms?)

Write away:

Explain the content of the book, but don't stop there: the whole point of a review is to offer insight on a book's worth, not just whether it has a chapter on interfacing with MySQL. Compare it to other books, explain whether this one met your expectations, criticize, parse.

By the same token, don't feel obligated to defend a poor book for its faultless page numbering and clean, unobstructed margins, or stretch to play up faults in a book you think is excellent in order to appear objective. A reader should know from your review your general impression of the book, and have an idea whether it's one they would benefit from or enjoy.

Style & mechanics:

- Write in complete sentences, and use logically connected paragraphs; avoid making your review a list of annotated chapter titles. Don't feel obliged to give each chapter or section equal space in your review; group logically to avoid a formulaic plodding-through ("Chapter 1 covers X, while chapter 2 delves into Z, followed the the 3rd chapter on Q ..."). Address chapters in the way you feel most comfortable, but stepping duly through the Table of Contents is often not the best approach. Which chapters are most important? Are there chapters which are not adjacent but which cover similar topics?

Remember, the body of your review should not resemble a bulleted list. (Also, don't include the book's Table of Contents with your review; if it's available online and particularly informative, feel free to include a hyperlink to it, though.)

Strive for correct spelling, grammar and punctuation in your review (and proofread with these in mind) but don't agonize over minutia. (Please run your review through a spell-checker before submitting, though.) If you're a hesitant writer, or if English is not your first language, it's a good idea to enlist a friend for advice and initial editing..

There are excellent style guides online; my favorite at the moment is [Jack Lynch's Guide to Grammar and Style](#). If he contradicts me, go with him! Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is my favorite in-print book, and can be downright amusing.

- Try not to sound like a marketing campaign. That means:
 - Avoid cliches (this book, which is better than sliced bread, cuts through the clutter to break down to the nuts and bolts of the real brass tacks at the heart of the matter). Write plainly.
 - Go easy on the exclamation marks and glib hyperbole ("This book belongs on every developer's desk!" sounds too much like "You're *not* going to pay a lot for this muffler!")
 - Be cautious in general about superlatives and strong adjectives. Don't say a book is "unsurpassed" or "the best available" on a given topic without doing some actual comparisons to likely contenders. Some other words of praise or derision are often used with too little backing evidence: rather than just calling a book "excellent," "sloppy," "boring," etc., provide concrete examples from the text that demonstrate these qualities.

- Watch your background. Even if each one is sensible by itself, too many adjectives in a sentence (or a review) makes it look like adjective soup. In particular, intensifiers like "very" and "extremely" in most cases can be excised to everyone's benefit.
 - Rhetorical questions are fine in small doses, but not large ones. More than a few rhetorical questions in a review can make it sound breathless and silly.
- Use quotation marks around chapter and section titles; remember that the *title* of chapter 5 could be "Applying Bingo to Wingo," but it's not "Chapter 5: Bingo to Wingo."
- Hyphenate compound modifiers (with the general exception of words ending in "y"). Examples:
 - half-height layout (not "half height layout")
 - step-by-step explanation (not "step by step explanation")
 - 15-page chapter (not "15 page chapter")
 - Chicago-based chain of coffee shops (not "Chicago based chain of coffee shops")
- On the first reference, please use the book's title capitalized and punctuated as shown on the book's cover or frontispiece. (Use the subtitle, too, if it scans sensibly. Some subtitles are too unwieldy to include.) Some titles are long enough that on later references you'll find it easier to abbreviate quite a bit, but don't call *Robert Wallywhumper: Hero of the Revolt On Penullbian Three* merely *Bob* until you've prepared the reader for the transition.