Linux Documentation Project Reviewer HOWTO

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Revision History

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Minor bugfixes.		
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Initial release.		

This document will help you review LDP documentation. It includes procedures, tips and techniques to make the process easier.

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1. Introduction

The LDP Review Project is a "working group" of the *Linux Documentation Project* whose goal is to improve the quality of the LDP's documentation. We are approaching that goal from two different angles: a review of newly submitted documentation, and a review of existing documentation. Both projects are at an early stage right now, so we are very much open to your suggestions for improvement.

We have a mailing list established at *http://www.lupercalia.net/mailman/listinfo/ldp−review*.

1.1. Copyright and License

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2. Reviewing Newly Submitted Documentation

This review project will continue throughout the life of the LDP. The process will act as a front−end quality assurance review for new documentation which is submitted to the LDP. Ideally documents will be reviewed within one week of their submission to the LDP.

Coordinators of this effort will announce to the list or notify individual review members of new document submissions. The coordinators will try to funnel documents to reviewers who have knowledge in the same technical area as the documentation. If the reviewer is not a technical expert in that particular area and needs technical questions answered, there will be a technical expert designated who will be able to address any technical issues or questions.

Once reviewers have agreed to work on a document, they will have one week to complete the review. If they are not able to complete the review within that time frame, they will need to let the coordinator know of their difficulties so that the author can be notified of the problem. Because these reviews need to be conducted rather quickly, there will be times when reviewers will be more able to accept review work.

When reviewing newly submitted documents, refer to the Section 4 and Section 5 portions of this guide for the types of information to verify and correct. As a reviewer, you will need to check the documents out of the CVS and make any necessary changes. If changes are extensive or if the document has glaringly and fundamentally fatal errors, contact a coordinator to let him or her know what the problems are. Once changes are made, the reviewer will update the minor version number, submit the changes to the CVS, and send the original author a copy of the source.

3. Reviewing Existing Documentation

This project will focus on reviewing documentation that already exists on the LDP. Our goal is to implement a quality management program that makes sure we are supplying up−to−date, accurate, easily read documentation. This process will be ongoing throughout the life of the LDP. Initially, we will try to review all documents currently on the LDP. Once we have made our way through existing documents, we will schedule dates for follow−up reviews. By continually reviewing the documents throughout their life on the LDP, we help make sure that readers have the best experience with Linux documentation.

In addition to the primary goal of improving the quality of the documentation itself, we will also be gathering data about the collection for storage in some sort of database to facilitate the ongoing management of the collection. However, this stage of the review is still being defined; details about the specifics and how this data will be measured will be added in the future.

Below are some general guidelines that you should follow before you begin reviewing existing documentation for the LDP. Please try to have document reviews completed within two weeks of the time you sign up to review a document.

3.1. Choosing a Document

Because this process is just getting started, there are many documents that need review. The most important thing is that you coordinate your work with the other reviewers. To coordinate the effort, we have set up a mailing list for reviewers.

Notify the ldp−review list, which is currently housed at *http://www.lupercalia.net/mailman/listinfo/ldp−review*, before you begin to review a document. We want to make sure your work is directed where it is most needed and where it will be most useful. Of course, you may have a particular area of expertise and that will dictate your choice to some extent. You can ask on the list for an assignment, or you can select one for yourself and just let us know what you're doing.

3.2. License Issues

Make sure you have the legal right to work on the document. If it is licensed under a free license that specifically grants such rights, you are fine. If not, you need to contact the author and get permission.

If you do not plan to actually change any of the content, but simply report on the document's status, then you don't need permission, regardless of license. Of course, it is still polite, and advisable, to write the author anyway.

3.3. Working With the Latest Version

Make sure the copy you are reviewing is the most current.

If your document includes a URL to an official homepage, visit that page and see if it displays the same version number. If you find the same version number, you are fine. If you find a newer version number, write to the author and ask him or her to please submit the newer version to you.

3.4. Picking a Review to Conduct

There are many different ways a document can be reviewed, and you may have the skills to do only one or two types of reviews. It is sometimes useful (and easier) to do each review as a separate pass through the document; Your Mileage May Vary.

The following sections explain the various types of reviews we are conducting. Use these sections as a guide to help you choose the type of review to conduct and to help you conduct the review itself. Again, when you post your review choice to the review list, please specify the type of review you would like to be responsible for.

4. Technical Accuracy Review

Make sure the facts as stated in the document are correct, helpful, and on topic.

To do a technical accuracy review, you really need to know your subject matter, probably as well or better than the original author. Use whatever other documentation is available for your subject, including man pages, program documentation, other printed books, etc. You might also use mailing lists on the topic, asking for third parties to verify certain facts of which you are in doubt.

When doing this type of review, consider if the information is only valid for certain types of hardware or software. If this is the case, make sure to note the limitations of the document within the document, either within the abstract or as a note at the beginning of the document. For example, if the solutions in the document only are relevant for one type or brand of hardware, make sure that that limitation is defined. This will keep readers from trying to apply a certain type of technology to an application or situation where it will not work.

5. Language Review

Because writers come from all types of backgrounds, there may be problems within the documentation that need to be fixed. Writers may be very knowledgeable in their subject areas but not great writers, or they may be excellent writers but not completely fluent in the language of the document. The language review addresses these types of problems by focusing on language issues that make the document easier for the user to read and understand. Some of the problems that may occur within the document are poor sentence structure, grammar, organization, clarity, and spelling.

If you are doing a language review, you should be fluent in the language and the structure of the language. You want to consider both the logic and grammar of the document. Your primary goal in a language review is to identify and correct areas that could lead to confusion for the reader/user of the document. To this end, you can most certainly use language and grammar references such as dictionaries and handbooks when in doubt.

Although this review does address the structure and delivery of the language, you should not attempt to purge the document of individuality and personality in an attempt to make it "sound better" or more technical. Stilted, humorless language and structures are not the goals here. Again, your goal should be to make the document clear, unambiguous, and correct in spelling and grammar.

Items to evaluate:

- **Spelling.** Spelling should conform to a standardized English spelling of terms. For words that are new to the language and not yet standardized (e.g. technical Linux terminology that is generally accepted in the community), follow the most common spelling for the term.

  Note

  Because there are two generally accepted forms of English, this review should not privilege American English spellings over British English spellings, or vice−versa. For example, if the author is writes British English and uses the word "realise", you should not change the spelling of the word to "realize" just because you speak/write American English.
- **Grammar.** For the purposes of this review, grammar should address issues such as standards of subject/verb agreement, pronoun/antecedent agreement, etc. One of the common and confusing mistakes made in HOWTOs is unclear pronoun antecedents.

  For example, to say, "You will need to set several parameters in the config file to make it compile correctly. The ones you choose to set make a big difference." In this example it sounds like the config file is what is compiling and it takes a re−reading of the phrase for it to be clear that "The ones" refers to the parameters.

  Along these same lines, many authors writing for the LDP use smiley faces and exclamation points where they would never be accepted in formal documentation or grammar handbooks. The general rule to follow at this time is to leave the smiley faces and gratuitous punctuation marks in place unless they interfere with the reader's understanding of the concepts being explained. The rationale behind this is to protect the more conversational tone of the LDP documentation.

- **Capitalization.** The word "HOWTO" should always be in full caps with no hyphen. Also, the document title should always be in title case. This means that first words in a title are always capitalized. The only words not capitalized in a title are prepositions, articles, and proper nouns which would not be capitalized otherwise (e.g. insmod). Other capitalization should follow rules of standard English.
- **Clarity.** Judgements on clarity are sometimes difficult to make. One successful strategey in evaluating clarity is asking the question "If I did not already know this information, would the explanation be clear from this document." If it is confusing to you and you already generally understand what the author is trying to say, then there is a good chance that the explanation is really confusing for someone reading the document for the first time. If you run across this situation, and you don't really know how to correct the technical explanation, or you are afraid your changes might affect the meaning of the document, ask for help from a technical expert. If no technical expert is available or no one responds to your requests, note the needed changes in the review and mark that these concerns need to be addressed in the technical review.
- **Organization.** In some cases the document would really benefit from a different structure. You should address these issues when they interfere with the understanding of the information within the document. If a document gives background information after a procedure has been performed, this may well be too late for the reader to fully consider the information he or she needs before performing the task. Look for document organization that might confuse or mislead the reader. These will be the types of issues you want to address. Once these are identified, it may be worthwhile to let the author know your rationale and discuss major changes with him or her.
- **Sentence Structure.** To some extent, sentence structure issues are discussed in the grammar section; however, there are some additional issues that are not grammatically incorrect but do interfere with the readers comprehension of the material. One of the most noticable of these is stacked prepositional phrases. Stacked prepositional phrases become a problem when the document's readability suffers because it becomes less and less clear what the subject and action of the sentence are. In some cases more precise descriptors are needed or sentences need to be changed from one long sentence that is hard to comprehend, to two or three more easily read sentences.
- **Readability.** This area is somewhat subjective. What passes for fairly readable material to one person might be confusing to someone else. Because this is a value judgement you should be cautious when marking up an author's work for readability. Realize when basing a judgement on readability that you might be dealing with preferences of style. At this point in time within the LDP, there is no set style or stylistic rules that authors need to follow. In evaluating readability you must consider whether or not the way the document is written truly interferes with the readers understanding of the information. If the answer you come up with is "No, but it doesn't sound like I think it should." then you should probably not re−write the text to make it sound better to you.
- **Versioning.** Every document should have a version number, preferably in the form Major.Minor.Bugfix, where each section is an integer. Some authors use Alan Cox style versions (e.g., 1.4pre−3) and some include additional information (e.g., 1.3beta). This is acceptable but not encouraged. The most important thing is that we *have* a version number so we know which version we are dealing with! Once a document goes through review it should advance in minor or bugfix version number, depending on the amount of change introduced.
- **Title.** The title should be in proper title case. The general principle for this is that all words are capitalized in a title except prepositions and articles (an article will be capitalized if it is the first word in the title). The word HOWTO should be in all capital letters. There should be no hyphens within the word HOWTO (with the exception of the Mini−HOWTO). The version should not be included in the title.
- **Date Formats.** Dates should be in standard ISO format, which is YYYY−MM−DD.

- **Uniform Use of Terms.** Because the HOWTO you are reviewing is probably filled with new information for the reader, it is important that the terms discussed throughout the document be uniform. For example, referring to a part or parameter in one section of the document by one name and then calling it by another name (or an abbreviation that has not be explained) in another part of the document is confusing for the reader. Making sure that terms are the same throughout the document goes a long way in helping the reader understand the documentation.
- **Definitions of Acronyms or Slang.** Terminology and language within the realm of computer technology changes rapidly. In reviewing documents you may find that many of the terms that are being discussed are not valid words in any dictionary or technical reference that you are familiar with. In this case you will need to search on terms and find if they are, in fact, terminology that is accepted in the general Linux community. Terms that are less familiar should be defined immediately following the first instance of the term. Slang should be replaced with more common terminology if the slang will causes the reader to be confused by the connotation or denotation of the term. Remember that readers using the document may not come to English as a primary language and, therefore, you should do your best to make sure that the document is as easy to understand as possible.

6. Reporting Your Results

Once you have completed your review of a document, you should send your results back to the working group. The coordinator will record your work in the database. The coordinator will not need the updated source, but he or she will need any metrics you have collected and your notes. He or she will also need to know which types of review you have completed.

If you have made any modifications to the document, also send your updates to the author or maintainer, as well as the LDP Submission List, which is at *submit@linuxdoc.org*.