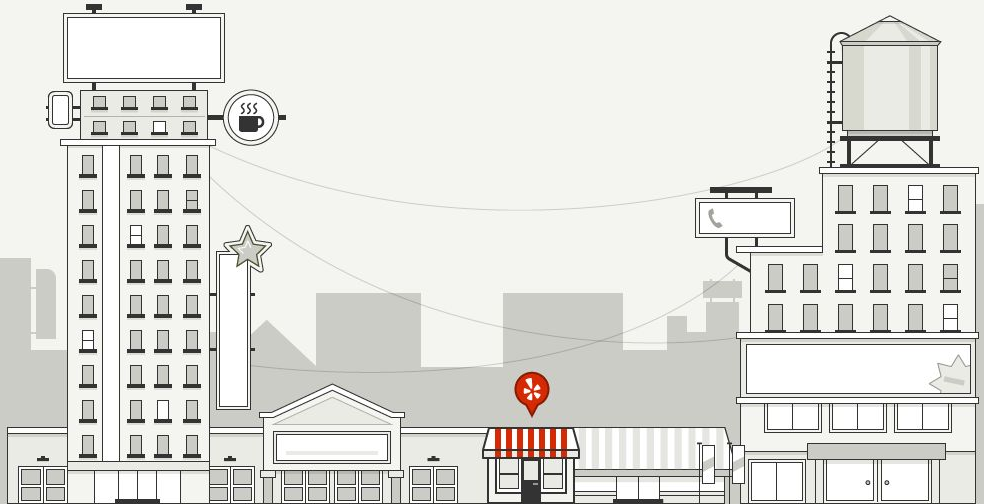
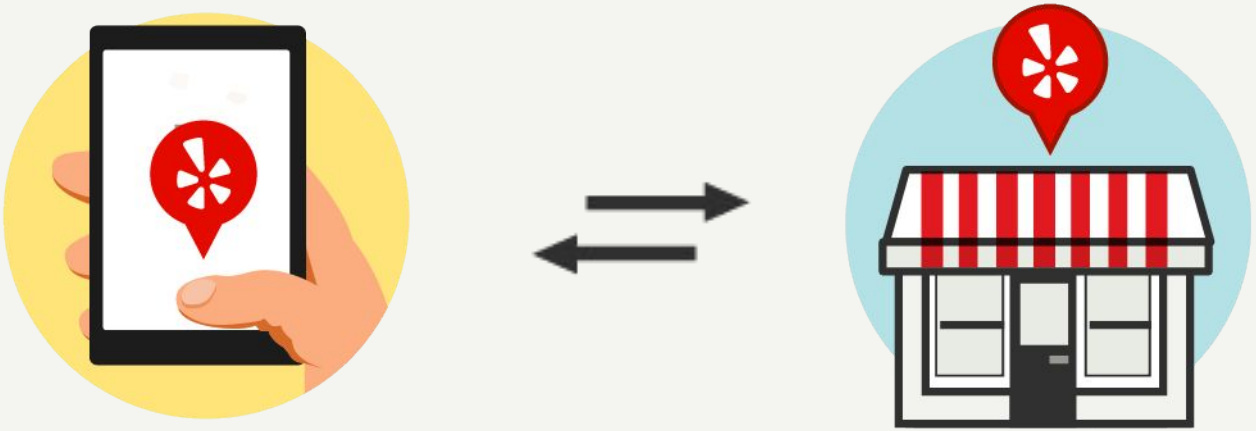
The 7 Deadly Sins of Documentation

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Yelp's Mission

Connecting people with great local businesses.



Who am I and why do I care?



Who thinks they have good docs?



Why do you need good documentation?

- Onboarding
- Institutional Knowledge
- Incident Response
- Inclusiveness
- Self-Perpetuation



The Root of All Evil: Deprioritization



Documentation is seen as "extra" work.



Why don't we prioritize documentation?



What happens?

- No one has time to go back, or when they do, they don't remember why things were done
- There's a tendency to see documentation as "lesser work" by engineers and management -- quality suffers
- Often relegated to new or junior members of a team, who lack context necessary to write good docs
- No one learns how to improve their writing



Documentation isn't extra work.

It's necessary work.



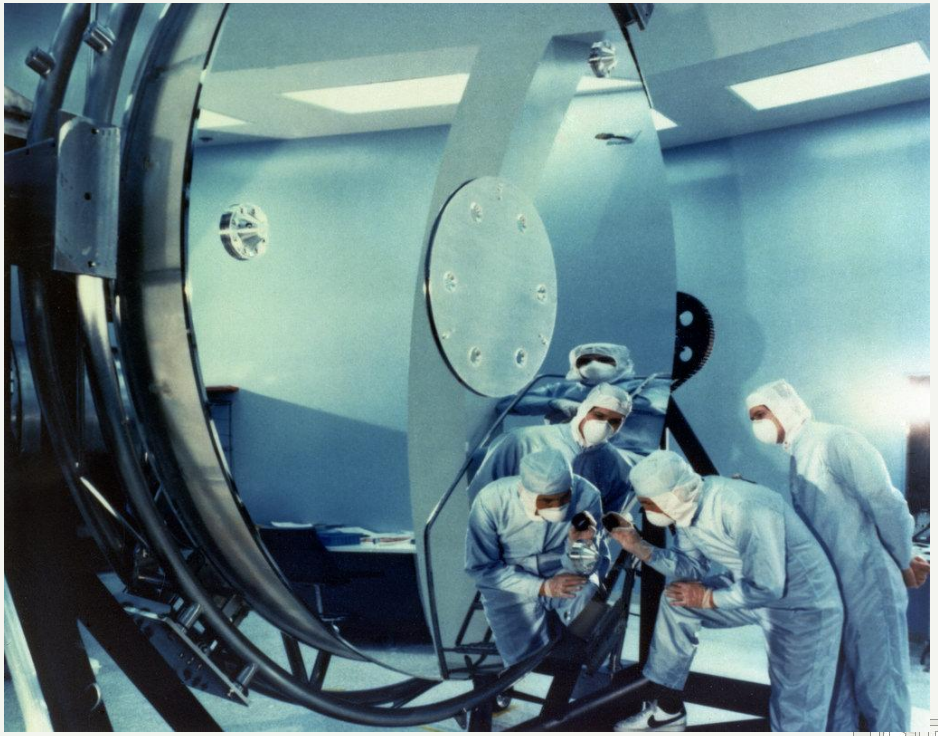
Documentation as a deliverable



Create documentation standards and style guides



Have a real review process



Everyone needs to pitch in



The Six Subsequent Sins

Burying the Lede
Documentation Overgrowth
Repository Overload
Comment Neglect
Jargon Overuse
Video Addiction



Burying the Lede,
or the Master of None



- When in an incident, you need immediately useful runbooks
- When you're trying to learn how a system works, you need a document with a thorough description of how it works and what it interacts with
- Too often we have one or the other -- or we try to do both with a single document



You wouldn't describe how to fix a tire by starting with a car factory.

You wouldn't describe how a car is built by starting with how to fix a tire.



Runbooks

- Address specific questions; make sure alerts link directly to diagnostic and remediation steps
- Use inverted pyramid format; put the most important information or more common questions at the top
- Make sure your example commands will be benign
- Have explanations of why you're doing this, but keep them short -- one or two sentences
- Make sure the steps in the runbook actually work!



ohshitgit.com

Oh shit, git!

Git is hard: screwing up is easy, and figuring out how to fix your mistakes is fucking impossible. Git documentation has this chicken and egg problem where you can't search for how to get yourself out of a mess, unless you *already know the name of the thing you need to know about* in order to fix your problem.

So here are some bad situations I've gotten myself into, and how I eventually got myself out of them *in plain english**.

Oh shit, I did something terribly wrong, please tell me git has a magic time machine!?!

```
git reflog
# you will see a list of every thing you've done in git, across all bra
# each one has an index HEAD@{index}
# find the one before you broke everything
git reset HEAD@{index}
# magic time machine
```

You can use this to get back stuff you accidentally deleted, or just to remove some stuff you tried that broke the repo, or to recover after a bad merge, or just to go back to a time when things actually worked. I use `reflog` A LOT. Mega hat tip to the many many many many many people who suggested adding it!



Technical Documentation

- Be sure to include the context of why things were built this way, not just how
- Provide concrete examples for how things function
- Know your audience
- Don't rely on autogenerated documentation
- Be wary of sending people down a rabbit hole
- Make sure what people understand is what you meant to say



Make your intent clear

- Prefix document titles with a type (Runbook, Howto, etc)
- Break documents down further if you think it's useful
- Audience statement at the top of the document can help



Repository Overload



Water, water everywhere...

- Docs in a wiki, in a Google Doc, in a git repo...
- How does someone know where to find the docs they need, or where to put new docs they write?
- Especially a problem in a crisis -- incidents will last longer, SMEs will have to be brought in more often, burnout becomes a bigger danger.



The worst docs are the docs no one can find.



Putting Things in Order

- Keep docs in one place as much as possible, at least for each type of documentation; multiple places to edit causes drift and confusion
- Make sure whatever repository you use can track changes and is searchable
- Provide portals that give easy access points into docs, especially one that surfaces critical or top-level docs
- Don't make the mistake of using email, chat logs or tickets as primary sources of documentation



Documentation Overgrowth



Outdated, conflicting, or misleading

- Documentation not updated to reflect new realities
- Keeping documentation around for "historical purposes" clutters searches and can slow incident response
- Old, incorrect docs lie around, which is especially bad for new or inexperienced team members



Pruning The Garden

- Include documentation in project goals
- Instead of keeping old documentation around, pull out what is still useful and incorporate it into new docs, discard the legacy doc
- If you need to keep them, make sure archived docs will not show up in searches



Pruning the Garden

The best way to keep your docs up to date is to use and update them regularly.



Comment Neglect



"The code is the documentation"

- Even good code does not show the context of how decisions were made about why the code was written that way ("Is it supposed to work this way?")
- Tendency to assume your code is easy to read and understand -- if you've been working on it for weeks, it seems intuitive, even if it's not
- Someone else may not have as good an understanding of the language or functionality of the code



Here's some better comments:

```
# See this page for context on why we use this
# method: http://ourwiki.com/thing

# Optimally we'd hit the API, but we got throttled
# last time we did that, so we look at the cached
# results instead.

# This configuration file sets up the regional
# endpoint for us-west; see gslb-prod.tf for how
# it ties in to the overall config and weighting.
```

@Black_Isis

Context is King

- Make sure people can understand what your code is *supposed* to be doing and why
- Make sure comments or documentation on the project describe the context for how decisions were made about how to write certain functions
- Documentation should include concrete examples of the intended behavior
- Is there someone on your team who's never looked at that code before? Can they tell what it is for?



Jargon Overuse



I don't get it...

- Especially in young organizations, a close-knit engineering staff can use a lot of specific jargon or shorthand.
- New people need to learn the new lexicon, obscuring relationships between components, causing confusion, and keeping people in the "out" group.
- Do you want impostor syndrome? Because that's how you get impostor syndrome.



Bridging the Gap

- Avoid jargon if possible (especially if there's a more general term for it)
- Keep the audience for your documentation in mind
- When unavoidable, provide a glossary and plenty of context so it can still be understood
- Create an inclusive environment where people feel safe asking "stupid" questions



Video Addiction



Pivoting to Video?

- Video is more engaging than text (maybe)
- Can be easier to present and explain complex topics in a video than in a flat document
- Video can be more memorable than a flat document



But...

- The big problem with relying video (and graphics to a lesser extent) is that they cannot easily be searched
- If there's no content marks, you've got to watch the whole thing to find what you need
- Much harder to edit if the content needs to be updated, especially video
- They're also not great from an accessibility point of view -- screenreaders don't work well with them, and videos need subtitles for hearing-impaired folks



Use Videos and Graphics Responsibly

- Don't use video as your primary documentation method
- Videos are great for things that need to be consumed end-to-end and are updated infrequently, like onboarding
- Make sure graphics have alt-text, don't cram in too many
- Make sure videos have timestamps for content and subtitles (and consider transcripts)



Practicing What I Preach



Inception

Wrote style guide during hackathon to start

Operations Documentation Style Guide

Created by Chastity Blackwell, last modified just a moment ago

In order to make sure we provide consistently good documentation that is also easy to find, this guide lays out a number of standards to use when writing your documentation.

Make Your Documentation Discoverable

One of the most important parts of writing documentation is to make sure that it is discoverable. This is not the same as searchable; discoverable means that someone should be able to find the document without knowing exactly what they are looking for. **For this reason, Operations has decided that Confluence will be our primary repository for documentation**, and there are a few methods you can use in this framework to make your documentation more discoverable. If you're looking to move a document from Google Docs to Confluence to improve discoverability, see Migrating Documentation from Google Docs to Confluence.

- **Create a portal.** If you are working on a large project, or collecting the projects for a team, you can have a portal, like the Operations Home Page, that gives easy access to the most frequently used or most important documents that project/team maintains. When you do this, try to make sure that the portal is no more than one page, and that the you have arranged it such that the most frequently used/widest audience/most important docs are towards the top of the page (this is the inverted pyramid style).
- **Group like documents together.** Let's say you have a new service, and you need to create a topical guide, a howto, and a runbook for the service. One way to group these such that the connection between them is obvious is to make the howto and runbook child documents of the topical guide. There should also be links between those documents included so that it is easy to navigate between them. In general, the best grouping is based on subject, rather than the type of document; if I'm trying to solve a problem with Puppet, for instance, and I'm looking at the runbook for it, the other documents I'm probably most interested in finding next are not other runbooks, but other Puppet documentation.
- **Keep titles short and descriptive.** If you're writing a runbook for the "Helper" service logs, calling it "Runbook: Helper Logs" is much better than "Runbook: Helper 1" or "Runbook: Logs" (even if it's connected to the Helper service document). Documentation doesn't necessarily need to be dry and boring, but it is first of all functional, and we need to make sure that it serves that purpose, so avoid giving it a name like "Help! What do I do with Helper Logs?" or whatever. **Avoid making titles too generic.** If you name your page "Docker", chances are someone else will make another page similarly named, and they will all show up in a search right together. "Docker for Operations" or "Docker for Service X" is a much better title. Also keep in mind that links will be organized in the left side table of contents alphabetically, so try to make your first word (or the first after the "Howto:" or "Runbook:" prefix) specific; i.e. "Howto: Load Balancer Configuration" not "Howto: Configuring Load Balancers".

Types of Documentation

Within Operations, we have a number of different categories for documentation. Each category serves a different purpose and sometimes, a different audience. This determines what should be in the document; regardless of audience and content, all documentation should be in Confluence in the Operations space, if at all possible.

The Style Guide

- Established our company wiki as authoritative
- Guidelines on how to title documents for discoverability
- Clearly defined document types: topical guides, howtos, and runbooks
- General writing tips: how to style command lines, formatting links to other pages, etc
- Linked to our brand style guide and other documentation resources



The Grand Design

- Major Q2 Project
- Created tickets for major documentation subgroups; later we had to break it down further
- Much of it fell to me as the person who felt strongest about it
- Do we just want things moved to the wiki, or do we want to do more revision at the same time?



Our Reach Exceeded Our Grasp…

- Even just revising documentation takes a lot of time
- Getting reviews from people (especially experts) is hard
- Just copying documents from one place to another is a double-edged sword



...But the Effort Was Worth It

- Starting the conversation made me realize I wasn't alone
- Our most-used documents got moved over and significantly improved
- Revised onboarding documentation has improved the new-hire experience
- Awareness of previous problems helps buy capital for future work



Entering a State of Grace



- Have runbooks and have in-depth technical docs, but don't try to do both in same place.
- Store your docs in one or two repositories that keep a history, are easily searchable, and easily updated
- Update them frequently and don't clutter the repo with old docs
- Provide plenty of context in your code comments
- Avoid jargon where you can, define it where you can't
- Be wary of overusing video and graphics



Documentation isn't extra work, it's necessary work.




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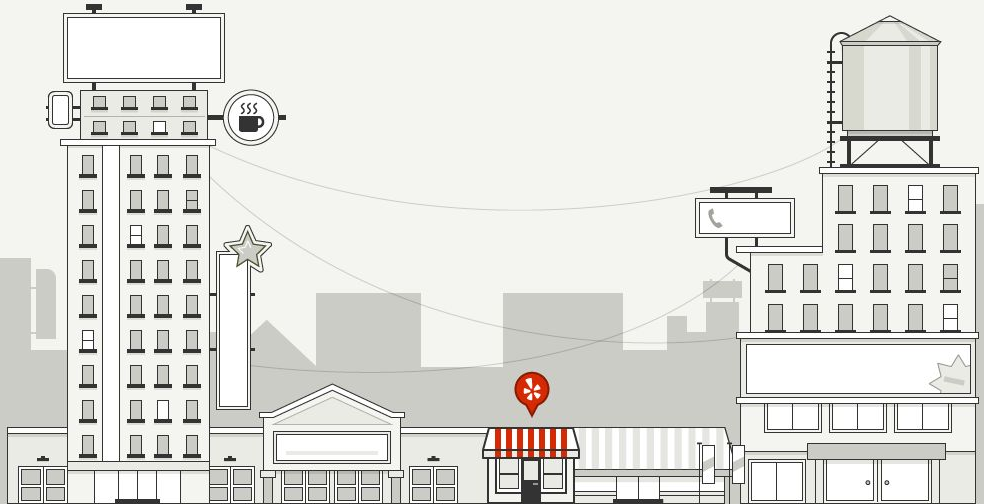
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