

About the Series

This is the eleventh in a series of booklets that SAGE is presenting to the system administration community. They are intended to fill a void in the current information structure, presenting topics in a thorough, refereed fashion but staying small enough and flexible enough to grow with the community.

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By Mark C. Langston

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USENIX is the Advanced Computing Systems Association.

11 *Short Topics in*
System Administration

Rik Farrow, Series Editor

**Documentation Writing for
System Administrators**

Mark C. Langston

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Foreword

Documentation is a critical skill for system administrators. I really do not think that it generally comes into consideration when senior sysadmins get hired or when they interview prospective junior sysadmins. But after having read Mark Langston's excellent booklet, I find myself convinced that the ability to document well and the habit of thorough documentation should be considered essential qualifications for any sysadmin position.

I once asked someone in my group to resign, because he refused to document his work. This young man was brilliant, a genius, as well as a hard worker. Yet he believed that the solutions he came up with were his own and not to be shared, even though he was working as part of a team in a support group. The young man did resign. Although I regretted losing such a talented person, I felt relieved that I no longer had someone on our team who hoarded everything he learned.

Having worked as a solitary system administrator, I can confess to having done a poor job of documentation. I could argue that the place where I worked was not large, and that what I was doing appeared so obvious that it did not require documentation. But the truth was that it was obvious only to me. Tasks such as getting an early version of AIX or Apollo's DomainIX participating in NFS file sharing really deserved proper documentation. No one should have to go through those experiences again. Once was surely enough.

Mark Langston provides clear, friendly, and helpful guidance, not only in the techniques of writing documentation, but also in building the habit of good documentation. Even though I now work alone, I have begun documenting the changes I make in the systems I manage, because life really is easier when I can refer to good notes that remind me of the clever, or necessary, things I have done.

Good documentation leaves you, the practicing sysadmin, with more time to devote to really interesting tasks or projects. I heartily recommend that you read this booklet and learn to practice the art of documentation.

Rik Farrow