How to write horrible documentation

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Pradyun Gedam
Software Engineer, Python Infrastructure

TechAtBloomberg.com

About Me

- @pradyunsg on Twitter, GitHub, Mastodon, etc.
- Curator of sphinx-themes.org
- Author of multiple Sphinx extensions
- Author of Furo, a modern Sphinx theme
- Maintainer of pip, packaging and more
- Moderator on PyPI

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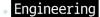
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Where to get these slides

https://pradyunsg.me/talks/





How to write horrible documentation

All the "documentation" stuff is a waste of time anyway.

Quick Guide

- Make discovery of information more difficult
- Leave gaps
- Provide inaccurate information
- Assume things about the reader
- Make it difficult to understand
- Inconsistency is the secret sauce
- Make it look and feel ancient
- Make it difficult to work with

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Make discovery of information more difficult

What if... you can't find something you know is documented?

- Spread information across multiple pages
- Don't provide a clear separation of content
- Have long pages, with lots of unrelated, but useful-in-context information





Make discovery of information more difficult

Search...

- Don't provide it
- Make it so bad that it's basically useless
- Make it difficult to locate or use
- Require exact matches

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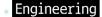
Leaves gaps

We shouldn't document everything.

Let's abuse that!

- Omit details that are relevant, but "not important"
- Include references to things that aren't documented
- Works best with a bad site structure





Provide inaccurate information

Make "mistakes" and hide them

- Use paragraphs to describe step-by-step actions
- Provide slightly incorrect descriptions
- doctests can prevent you from having incorrect code snippets

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Provide inaccurate information

Avoid discussing pitfalls

- Make warnings obscure by burying them in text
- Leave it unclear which option is preferred
- Don't document that a certain approach is deprecated





Make assumptions about the reader

Assume who they are

- Gendered references
- Accessibility



Engineering

Make assumptions about the reader

Assume what they know

- Keep it unclear what the expected background knowledge is
- Jargon!
 - Serves as shorthand for "well-understood" concepts
 - Makes it clear that the author knows the nuances and details
- Acronyms!





Make it difficult to understand

Mix "levels" of information

- Mix details when discussing high-level concepts
- Jargon helps obscure this





Make it difficult to understand

Glossary pages!

- Define terms with "simple" words
- Cross-reference other terms in definitions





Inconsistency is the secret sauce

Use a mix of writing styles

- You can do this by using MyAwesomeTomato to get red color
- Using MyAwesomeCarrot, it is possible for a user to get orange colours





Inconsistency is the secret sauce

Have multiple "sources of truth" for information

Can you slip in a contradiction? Even better!





Inconsistency is the secret sauce

Include typos!

- Bonus points if things have very similar names (PyPI, PyPy, mypy)
- Use multiple name styles
 - Pip is a package manager
 - pip comes installed with Python
 - PIP has 6 maintainers





Make it look and feel ancient

Modern web design guidelines are a fad

- Odd font choices
- Difficult to read font sizes
- Non-responsive design



Engineering

Make it look and feel ancient

Use "bad" site designs

- Poor navigational capabilities
- Slightly misaligned elements
 - to annoy those with a web design background
- Low contrast colour choices



Engineering

Make it difficult to work with

Introduce complexity in the workflows

- "Custom" documentation generators and build pipelines!
 - Avoid standard tooling or make it difficult to use
- Create fragile "helpers"
- Unclear build instructions





Make it difficult to work with

Introduce complexity in the content

- Treat documentation like code and make it DRY
- Use custom HTML to make that one thing look nice





Conclusion

There are lots of ways to make documentation worse

Many of these happen organically too

You now know how to spot these patterns





Shoutouts!

CGPGrey – "7 Ways to Maximize Misery ©"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO1mTELoj6o

Eric Holscher – "A beginner's guide to writing documentation" https://www.writethedocs.org/guide/writing/beginners-guide-to-docs/

Daniele Procida – "A Systematic Framework for Technical Documentation Authoring" https://diataxis.fr/

Sviatoslav Sydorenko – helped me come up with this talk's concept! https://github.com/webknjaz





Questions?

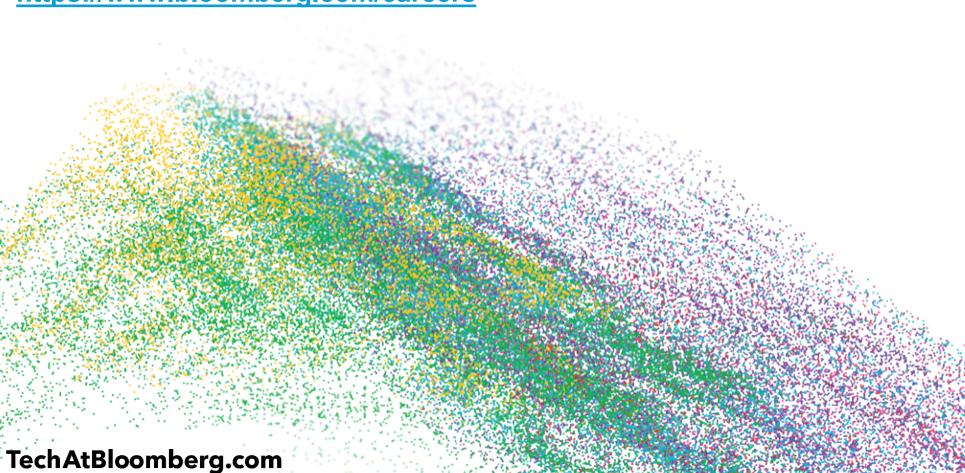


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