

COMPUTING WITH CLASS

Finally, a Computer Manual You Can Trust

If there is one thing I've learned after years of coping with computers and software it is this: Nobody writes manuals that tell me what I need to know when I need to know it. It's true, some manuals are slightly better than others, but that's not much of a recommendation.

- When I need to know whether I'll lose my word processing file if I reboot the system, does anyone make it easy to find out?

- When I want to italicize one word, what book tells me how in less than an afternoon's reading?

- On that rare occasion when I need to back up my hard disk, how can I find a step-by-step, comprehensive guide?

And even when I do find the section in the book that purportedly meets my need, what if I try the author's suggestion and it doesn't work?

Well, believe it or not, I have found a manual that tells me everything I always wanted to know in a language I can understand. Furthermore, it's organized so I can easily find the information I need.

It's called "My HOWI Book," and I wrote it. Unfortunately, you can't run to the bookstore to purchase a copy. It probably wouldn't work for you anyway. However, your "HOWI Book" will fill your needs exactly, because you will write it.

"But I'm not an author, and I know almost nothing about computers," you say. No problem. Your "HOWI Book" doesn't need a plot, character development, or exciting action. Anybody with a computer can write a "HOWI Book."

Begin with a three-ring binder and a stack of punched paper. Whenever you have a question (How do I turn on the

machine? How do I change the ribbon? How do I make a string variable turn into an integer?) start a new HOWI page.

Begin each page with the word HOWI (translated "How I"). Then write the procedure you want to know about, such as:

HOWI

Back up the hard disk

Find out how to do it any way you can—textbooks, manuals, teachers, salespersons, technicians, competitors, friends—all is fair in love and war and learning about computers and software!

Next, try it out. If it works, celebrate. When you've stopped jumping up and down or while you're waiting for the pizza you sent out for to arrive, write down clear, step-by-step instructions to do it the next time.

Double check each HOWI page to be sure that the instructions work, then file the sheet alphabetically in your book (under B for *Back up the hard disk*).

Chances are you'll remember how to do a procedure without looking it up if you use it often, but you'd be amazed

how many separate things you need to know. After you've gone on to other things, the "HOWI Back up the hard disk" may become fuzzy in your mind. Just one semicolon, bracket, brace, colon, or slash too many or too few—or in the wrong order—can paralyze your computer and you. But now you've got it covered. Next time you want to back up your hard disk, simply look it up in your HOWI book.

You may want to cross-reference entries for convenience. For example, "HOWI Back up the hard disk" could also be listed under "Hard disk, Making a backup of."

You might think that writing a HOWI book is a waste of time since it doesn't spare you the initial frustration of wrestling the information out of whatever sources you can find. But there's a greater frustration that happens much more often than that of not knowing something in the first place. It's the aggravation of knowing but not being able to quite remember. That's when you'll be thankful for having your "HOWI Book" to refer to.

You may find other uses for the "HOWI Book." If a teacher's aide comes to help in your classroom and needs orienting on your computer system, you can say, "Look it up in the HOWI Book before you ask me."

One final reason to make a "HOWI Book" and keep it up to date: You probably won't need to compile another book called "Disaster Control" whose entry under M might be "Making sure I don't get fired if I wipe out the hard disk."—Dave Ruskjer. □

Dave Ruskjer is President of Touch Talk Technologies, Mayo, Maryland.

