

TELLING STORIES

A SHORT PATH TO
WRITING BETTER
SOFTWARE
REQUIREMENTS

BEN RINZLER

Telling Stories

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*A Short Path to Writing Better
Software Requirements*

Ben Rinzler



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*The best story I have to tell is how I met my beautiful wife, Beth Ann,
and how she gave me two miraculous children, Lucy and Sam.*

This book is wholeheartedly dedicated to them.

About the Author

Ben Rinzler has been both writing about technology and managing writers and analysts for over 20 years. He began his career in technology at firms including Apple and Macromedia (now Adobe) as a technical writer and manager. He later moved to financial services and spent eight years at Morgan Stanley, where he managed a group of over 20 technical writers and business analysts. During this period, he began teaching courses to writers, analysts, developers, and managers in writing software requirements and explaining complex systems. Ben has a history degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and a certification in Analysis and Design of Information Systems from Columbia University. He now works in IT Operational Risk at Mizuho Securities USA. He lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with his wife and two children.

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Introduction

This book is about writing clear and compelling software requirements documents. It is not a comprehensive guide to managing requirements through the entire software development process. I focus narrowly on writing the requirements document because I believe this vital step has not been well explained. Aside from writing the document, I describe a few basic approaches to planning the requirements process and building the team you'll need to succeed, and I suggest a few strategies for working with the team as you go along. Many excellent books go into these topics in more detail. I will refer to them as I go along.

Many books help you build important skills for the requirements management process. Most are written by analysts, developers, project managers, and consultants, not writers. These books have a bias toward robust requirements processes for large projects executed by full-time analysts. In establishing credibility for these processes and the requirements-analyst profession, the authors sometimes make writing requirements seem very scientific and complex. Some authors are quite successful in describing how to discover and analyze requirements in great detail for engineering purposes. But these engineer-focused processes are often so specialized that nontechnical readers cannot follow them or understand the results. Often the outputs are a multimedia hodgepodge of storyboards, diagrams, spreadsheets, and presentations that are not clear to anyone who did not create them. This book aims to satisfy a need for a brief, clear explanation of an old-fashioned, document-based approach to requirements that works for most purposes.

This book will appeal to a wide range of stakeholders in the requirements process, especially those who are not full-time requirements analysts. I wrote this book with everyone I've known to struggle with the requirements process in mind, including development managers, engineers, project managers, program managers, IT business analysts, business-side analysts, product managers, business users, and technical writers.

The book stands on its own, for now. There are additional graphical examples on the book's Web site at www.wiley.com/go/tellingstories. As the subject

continues to evolve, or as readers demand, I may add additional material and templates to the site.

The methods I recommend are refinements, integrations, and a few additions to well-known and proven techniques of documenting requirements. I hope to add value in describing them quickly and showing how to put together the results in an engaging, logical, and readable sequence: a story.

Telling Stories

Telling Stories

1

Intent on a great project to renew the earth, God calls upon Noah, the one man he can trust to carry out his plans. He starts by clearly explaining the problem at hand:

And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.¹

A forceful and concise communicator, God then details what he wants done in the first phase of the project:

Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.

And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits.

A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it.

Having explained the basic requirements of the ark, God moves on to the main processes of phase two of the project, beginning with his own action items:

And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.

¹ Genesis 6:13 (King James).