Design a manual where you are instructing intermediate users how to use tables in MS Word.

You can assume that readers are familiar with basic operations of MS word like using the editor for writing purposes, using bullets & numbering, spell check, paragraphing conventions, headings etc. However, within the scope of their practice, it is not often necessary that they use tables.

Your software manual will be an instant guide to some intermediate features in designing tables. What that means is that you will take care to see that readers are able to use the word editor to design text, numbers and graphics within tables, the way they want to. Further, teach them how to place tables anywhere in the document and how to format tables.

You will consider two different approaches while designing this manual.

- Design an instant guide (2 pages average) that talks about basic features in designing tables. This is meant to be a hardcopy manual.

- Designing online help systems is the recent trend in the tech writing industry. Companies are spending lots of money to design online help systems such that content written once can be reused on different platforms for different purposes. Design a help system for online purposes but deliver it in hardcopy (2-3 pages average) for constraints regarding time and effort. Keep in mind that in actuality you would be designing this as online help. Here, we are designing a help system where issues are discussed in the pattern of important questions for very specific task situations that cannot be specifically answered in a direct way within the scope of the manual. You will frame the questions and provide answers to it.

Factors that you will consider while designing this manual:

- You will start discussing the basic features of creating a table but briefly. Take this more as overview information that you can perhaps expect intermediate readers to know.

- Try to show illustrations for each step and match it with the supporting text. Do not use illustration or text indiscriminately. For majority of these step discussions, you would need screen captures (print screen) to show how the exact operation is to be handled.

- Make a difference between creating a table versus manipulating the table in various ways (changing layouts, formatting, plugging in numbers, text etc) to contextualize it for a specific situation.
• Show readers how to plug in text and graphics within the table. Show readers how to change the border color, size and overall layout. Show them how to merge cells, how to covert text into tables and vice versa etc. You would need explicitly detailed headings like “creating a table”, “layout design”, “manipulating layout format” etc and isolate information accordingly within the manual. The information segregation should be very evident from the manual. Readers should be able to know that these are different classes of information and can be used under different work situations.

• Remember that this manual is for intermediate users. Make your own judgment as to the features that might be more suited for a typically advanced user and ignore those for this manual. Mention the ignored features in this manual briefly and state that these can be learnt in the next step. Your purpose here is to guide reader towards the next step in the process.

• Intermediate users might not typically want to use the table drop down menu to complete a specific operation. Instead, readers might have a specific query and they want to use the help menu. Readers will pose the question in the help section and same questions can be expected to be posed in different ways. The help systems will look at the key words used and search accordingly. The answers might or might not satisfy the readers. As a final feature in the first part of the manual, show them how they can use the “help” drop down menu to get an answer to a specific query. Write an example of a question that readers might pose for “help”.

• Completing the instant guide will help you with an insight into designing the help system. You might also use the “help” drop down menu to see how specific questions for a help system might be posed or answered. Consider that a particular reader might use both your instant guide and a help system. Typically, a help system might be accessed when the instant guide would not help explain a specific task or when readers are too impatient to read through the instant guide.

• In the help system, the art is to summarize the information and present in it a compact yet effective way. You are expected to be explicit in this section and add on separate pieces of information. Here, you might also point out towards certain steps or sections of the actual manual (the first part you designed) you created in the first step. However, often the questions might be very specific that you cannot possibly answer in the way you designed the actual manual.

• Make your judgment as to the order in which the questions have to be posed. A typical question for help system might be “how to plug in a graphic inside a specific area in a table and then squeeze its borders?” See how specific this question is. You might not have exactly answered this in the first part as any one particular step. Another specific question might be “how do I use arrows and lines within a text box that is located inside a table? You might have answered this separately in different sections of the manual. Readers would not have the patience to add on the answers from different sections of the manual and neither can you as a designer, afford to play with readers’ patience. Readers want to get there fast and you have to show them the shortcut to success.
• You can ask multiple questions in the “help system” section, but be selective. We are not planning to make comprehensive software documentation here. Pick and choose. You might choose 5-6 specific queries and answer them completely.

• Make sure to use illustrations as part of “help system”, but keep it compact and straightforward.

• Be careful in using the background / related information when explaining a specific situation in the help system. You can’t be too elaborate, but you have to be effective. This is difficult because you are expected to draw information from different layers of the manual.

• The art is also to know that beyond a point, you can’t be more specific. The art is to design questions that are specific but yet should be of help to the majority of readers searching for answers.

• You might also approach the “help system” by designing questions keeping in mind “keywords” or “a group of it used together”. 