Chapter 17

In a Nutshell

A manual should be written and designed so that readers are comfortable enough with the machine or object to confidently interact with it. Effective manuals teach readers that machines are objects that require humans to use and control them. Your readers can achieve this position as you help them relate to the machine.

Supply context. Help them see the machine from the designer's point of view. What does this machine or this part do, and why, and what kinds of concerns does that function imply? Once readers get the big picture, they will usually try to use the item for its intended purpose.

Explain what the parts do. List all the visible parts, and explain what they cause, how to stop or undo what they cause, what other parts work in sequence with them.

Explain how to perform the sequences. Think of readers as users or doers. What actions will they perform? Think of common ones like turning the machine on and off. Spend time working on the machine yourself so you can clearly explain how to work it.

Use visual logic. One major section should discuss each of the three areas mentioned above. Divide each section into as many subsections as needed. Use heads and white space so readers can easily find sections and subsections. Use clear text and visual aids so readers figure out how to do the actions confidently.

Develop credibility. Give brief introductions that tell the end goal of a series of steps; give warnings before you explain the step; state the results of actions or give clear visual aids so that readers can decide if they are progressing logically through the steps.