

The Wish I Had Known Document as a learning aid and workplace time-saver

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The Wish I had Known Document (WIHK-D) helps you remember how you solved problems, and is meant to be written while you are learning something. It should be used and expanded while you are trying to apply what you learned.

- Helps you easily communicate basic solutions to other beginners.
- Helps you remember how you solved obscure issues.
- Should retain a learner's perspective.
- Keeps crucial how-to information in an easily perused location.
- Complements other documentation as a valuable occupational aid.
- Best constructed while you are learning, and reviewed by experts before using as teaching aids.
- Can be made with greater technological sophistication, but do not go overboard.

Why do you need extra documents to tell beginners how to do obscure things? You need them because hours of work time are wasted when beginners become frustrated while trying and failing to perform non-intuitive operations. They may not remember how to do something, or they may have never known. Regardless, **a lack of simple learning and memory aids can waste time and can become stressful for many employees in an organization, including you.** What if you could help new users start with all the knowledge that you wish you had known back when you started learning the same thing? What if you could do this efficiently? What if your expert go-to employee could quickly point to a document providing easy answers for co-workers, instead of doing their work for them?

The ongoing challenge of remembering, learning, and teaching is part of what inspires us to create protocols, manuals, training videos, FAQs, and so forth. However, these are not perfect solutions. **Large documents can hide information rather than indicate it.** Large paragraphs in these documents can give the impression that valuable information is not currently in view, which can add to an already-present feeling of frustration. Nobody has time to read everything and perfectly retain it before applying knowledge. Instead, **we read most earnestly exactly when we need to know something.** FAQs are supposed to address this need, but many FAQs are written before user feedback is received and are often not very helpful beyond initial installation of a program.

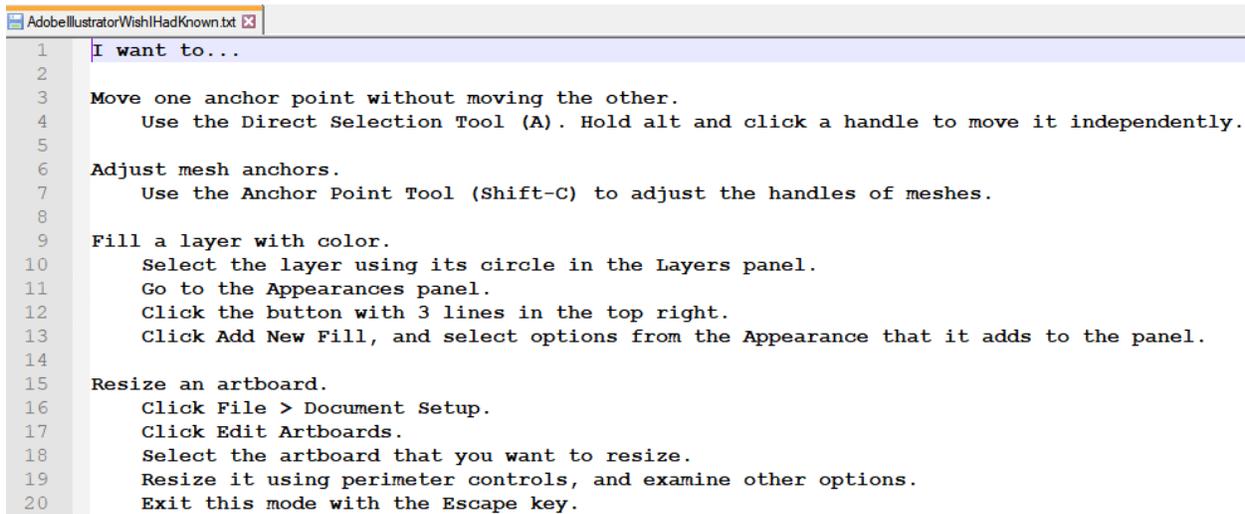
How-to videos are a special case, similar to seminars, in that they can help the viewer feel confident while they are being viewed. However, **many of us learn and retain knowledge by doing instead of watching.** Once we follow up on the presented topic, we can be very much surprised to learn that we do not know how to do that much. Additionally, videos and seminars often seem to completely cover a topic, but we may easily overlook how important connected details and perspectives have been unintentionally omitted.

A WIHK-D differs from the above alternatives in that it is a practical quick reference, meant to be used while doing something. **A WIHK-D should be concise and easy to reference, and it should feel refreshing** because it quickly provides a solution that you desperately wanted.

A WIHK-D is not a replacement for other documentation. It is meant to be used in conjunction with the manuals, protocols, videos, and seminars that do the heavy lifting in learning skills. When we learn something

simple that we wish we had known, we add it to our personal WIHK-D for the topic, or we add it to the organizational WIHK-D if we want to help others quickly reference the same thing.

The format is intentionally simple: an introductory category if you wish ('I want to...'), followed by problems and solutions, tasks and protocols, or questions and answers. Each line is kept as simple as possible while being explanatory, with steps or related information clearly visually associated with the problem or question. **Proper visual organization of teaching aids is highly important:** visual consistency and implied logic through visuals can teach people who had previously found the topic too daunting. **The more approachable the arrangement and format, the broader the potential audience.** Quick reference in simple text is achieved through the relatively unsophisticated but well-known method of using the Find function (Ctrl-F or Cmd-F) to find a keyword associated with an issue. Here is a plain text WIHK-D document that I created while learning Adobe Illustrator, which has many features that are not immediately obvious. See further below for solutions that go beyond a flat text document.



```
1 I want to...
2
3 Move one anchor point without moving the other.
4     Use the Direct Selection Tool (A). Hold alt and click a handle to move it independently.
5
6 Adjust mesh anchors.
7     Use the Anchor Point Tool (Shift-C) to adjust the handles of meshes.
8
9 Fill a layer with color.
10    Select the layer using its circle in the Layers panel.
11    Go to the Appearances panel.
12    Click the button with 3 lines in the top right.
13    Click Add New Fill, and select options from the Appearance that it adds to the panel.
14
15 Resize an artboard.
16    Click File > Document Setup.
17    Click Edit Artboards.
18    Select the artboard that you want to resize.
19    Resize it using perimeter controls, and examine other options.
20    Exit this mode with the Escape key.
```

Figure 1: A simple text WIHK-D for Adobe Illustrator, for personal use

One **advantage of going beyond plain text** is the ability to add explanatory screenshots. This can be handy, but many large images can also hide one another and can disorient the reader.

- With more features, live documents can be more effective for teaching than a flat document.
- Headings can make the solutions easily discoverable.
- Live hyperlinks can be used.
- Images can make the solutions easy to understand, even when the reader is caffeine-deprived.
- Keep a healthy balance between images and text.
- Images should tell a narrative that guides the reader to the solution and confirms that steps have been followed correctly.
- The less flat the document, the less it hides.

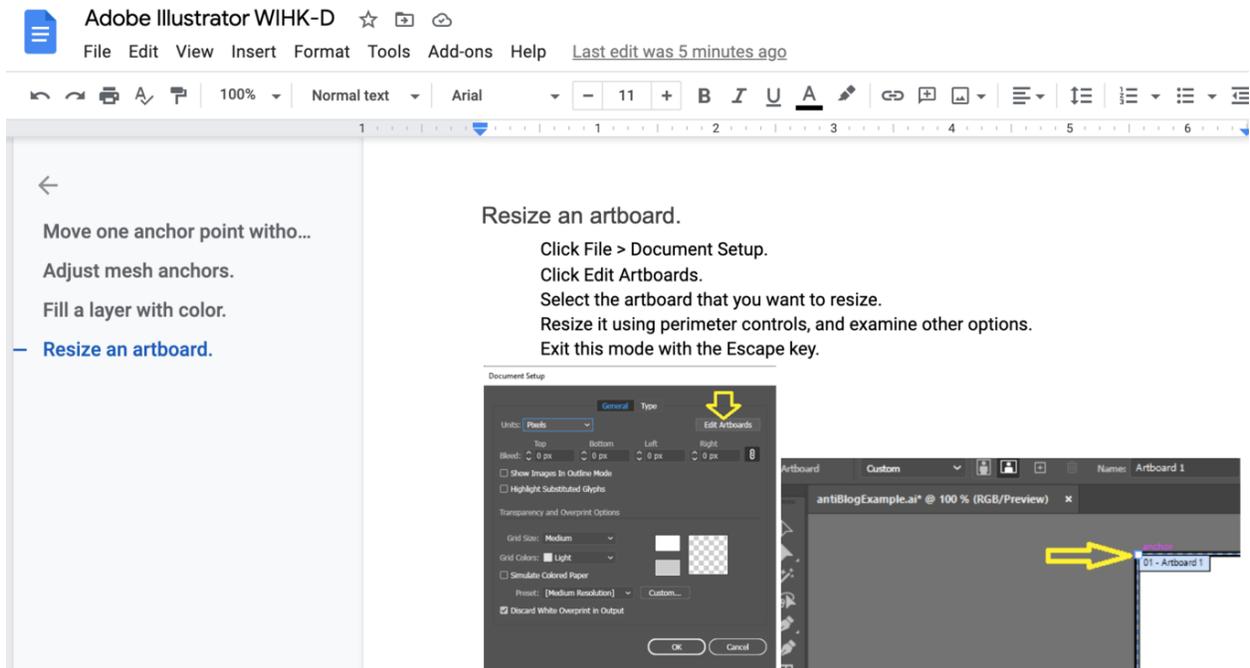


Figure 2: A step up in sophistication: A WIHK-D in Google Docs

This is not the limit of potential sophistication of WIHK-D construction, but I wanted to provide relatively simple examples with a minimum of required user knowledge. Please feel free to use as much technology as you wish when making your own WIHK-D! I predict that a customizable, accessible resource with version tracking will eventually prove to be best, but methods are best improved through use, refinement, and constructive organizational feedback.

To reiterate, **this is not redundant with regard to online documentation**: WIHK-D is a personal or collaborative document for you or your organization. It describes issues from a perspective that is valuable and familiar to you, and communicates in your own style. Official documentation is often not helpful to some users, even though it is correct, because it may not fit your perspective, knowledge level, or organizational culture.

I believe that **you will find WIHK-Ds to be indispensable** once you begin using them regularly as learning tools or occupational aids. Whenever you start to do anything that is unfamiliar or obscure, you will probably do what I have eventually learned to do: immediately open your WIHK-D for the topic, to find and record helpful information that you do not wish to forget.