# VIEWPOINT

# So You're Going to Write a Book

*by Pamela G. McIntyre*

Having worked with computers for nearly 20 years, I have acquired quite an extensive library of books on the subject. The one thing that holds true for each and every book on the shelf is that they all approach the subject from the computer's point of view. If people thought like computers, this would not be a problem. We know, however, that people do not think like computers and worse, they are loathe to pick up a book to learn how to use one. Perhaps that is because books were written for computers and not people.

The problem really becomes evident in books written for endusers of applications software. While there certainly needs to be some organization of the information in any reference book, there needs to be a greater effort to organize that information in a way that makes more sense to the user (i.e., a more task oriented approach). A great deal of time is wasted simply trying to find information. And if you are not familiar with the type of application in general (spreadsheet, database, etc.), there are features available to you that you may never know exist and therefore never know enough to ask about.

Another problem with books is that they always show you what should happen if you are doing things right. The only time people pick up a book is when things are not working right, and it is not likely that they will realize or remember what step they performed incorrectly.

Knowing that the 80/20 rule usually holds for users of software, that is, 80% of the users will only make use of 20% of the application's features, it should not be difficult to write a book that covers the 20%. I also find that 80% of users will make the same type of mistakes over and over and over again. Knowing this, put an explanation of the mistake at the point in the book where that mistake is most likely to be made, not in chapter 300 under troubleshooting (and possibly under some error code or cryptic description). This saves the user time and certainly increases productivity.

The first time I used a spreadsheet program, I suddenly found myself staring at a column filled with pound signs (#). It took me two hours to find out that the column simply wasn't wide enough to accommodate the number. If that information had been placed in the section on data entry involving numbers, I could have saved myself two hours and a lot of frustration.

What we really need is for endusers to write books. Unfortunately, endusers do not know enough to write books. Round and round we go. So, for those of you who do write books, have a heart and consult an enduser. Your book will be better off for it. **M**