3 things to ask yourself before starting any technical document

Most of my clients think the first thing I am going to need from them is content, but that could not be further from the truth. The content already exists somewhere and I will track it down when the time comes. But before I can even think about content, I need to ask three important questions.

1. Who is my audience?

I like to find out everything I possibly can about who my reader is:

- Age and educational level
- Existing knowledge of the subject
- Mandatory or optional
- Goal/knowledge to be obtained
- Location
- Physical or mental restrictions
- Anything else that might be pertinent

2. What is my deliverable?

Gone are the days of 350-500 page dissertations on how to install a piece of software. Audiences today want it short and sweet. They get bored easily and quickly migrate to greener pastures, so the KISS method is your best approach (*keep it simple, stupid*). Chunk information into sections that can be quickly and easily read, make it clear, and most of all—deliver it in a manner conducive to their environment and skills.

3. How much time will I have?

Work backwards on your documentation plan. Mark the calendar with the drop-dead go-to-press/go-live delivery date and start subtracting:

> Take three days off for Murphy. Yes, no matter how hard or fast you work, Murphy (as in *Murphy's Law*) will appear. Assume the reviewers need three days each for an initial review and a final review and that you need one day (each time) for their edits. Subtract eight more days.

Now, because you know <u>your</u> deadline for the first draft is 11 days prior to the final deadline, you can start gathering content from the SMEs.