



Karen Anderson

## Are the people who write instruction manuals trying to drive us all nuts?

*If you're easily frustrated with the assembly instructions for new products, Club Columnist Karen Anderson has some advice.*

When I was in kindergarten, I brought home an iffy report card. “Karen does not always follow instructions,” Miss Klingehopf observed grimly. My horrified mother prepared to take me to task. Then my dad intervened.

“Maybe the instructions were lousy,” he said with a shrug. “They usually are.”

Poorly written instruction manuals were the bane of my father’s orderly existence. When faced with the task of assembling or repairing furniture or an appliance, he always gave the instructions a more-than-fair chance. But they inevitably failed him.

He started by reading them cover-to-cover. He’d pause, at intervals, and thoughtfully scratch his jaw. If it was bad, he made growling sounds. Sighing, he’d set out the enclosed hardware alongside his tools on the table or carpet. Being an engineer, he neatly arranged the nuts and bolts and screws, by type and size, into saucers.

By the time he completed his elaborate preparations, my mom was hopping up and down with impatience. She wanted the assembly done so she could start using the thing. Unfortunately, this was the point at which my dad would simply walk away.

“I need to think about this,” he’d say, and stroll off to make a sandwich. Moments later, you’d see my mother tiptoeing over to the project, flexing her fingers.

“Don’t touch anything!” my apparently psychic father would call from the kitchen.

Eventually, my dad would return and slowly, painstakingly, get the job done ... perfectly, or so it seemed to me.

As you can imagine, my father instilled in me a wary respect for instructions – and for the people who actually read them. I also have high regard for those folks who put all the itty-bitty screws into saucers so they don’t roll off the table and vanish. People like that tend to be in short supply,

so rather than seek them out, I’ve become one. At our house, I assemble the tools and do the hands-on work, while the Scholarly Gentleman wrestles with the 40-page manuals that have instructions in five or six languages (none of them, apparently, native to the person who wrote them).

It works sort of like this: Bolts in hand, wrench poised, I crawl behind the malfunctioning gas grill.

“I’ve got the end cap removed from the #2 crossbar where it attaches to vent filter B,” I report. “What’s next?”

“ghoS maw mlqta’ nuH vaQ ‘uch legh ghuS!\*” gargles the Scholarly Gentleman.

I leap up, prepared to start the Heimlich maneuver, and find him staring at page 82-A of the manual.

“Good grief,” he says. They’ve printed them in Klingon.”

Truth be told, I have a great deal of sympathy for the people who write instruction manuals, in Klingon or any other language. That’s because, in the bleak years before I became a columnist, I wrote a few myself.

The terrible truth is that most of the time we never even saw the items we were writing about – they were still being designed somewhere. We had sketches, or pictures, or a prototype – if we were lucky.

“Insert screw B into hole #4 and align with the spring,” I once wrote in the manual for a two-drawer filing cabinet. My intentions were honorable. My text was translated then sent to the printer. Meanwhile, the filing cabinet was being re-designed and manufactured. Hole #4 had been moved from the front of the cabinet to the back. And it now required a bolt instead of a screw.

My directions drove untold hundreds of customers over the brink, and sent dozens of customer service representatives screaming out of the office.

My advice: When stumped by bad instructions, take a sandwich break. If you’re lucky, someone like my mother will rush in and assemble the darn thing. When you come back, you can blame the resulting disaster on them. Shake your head and say sadly, “Well, you should have read the instructions!”

\*Translation: “Approach the offending machinery holding the aggressive weapon at the ready.”

