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Personal README Files: User Manuals for Library Staff

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Personal README Files

User Manuals for Library Staff

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Designing for Digital
March 9, 2020

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Web Systems Librarian, Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries

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Rachel Vacek

Head of Design & Discovery, University of Michigan Library

@vacekrae

Outline

Traditional vs. personal README files

How we each picked up the idea

About our teams and how we’re using them

How personal README files have helped us

Discussion

Traditional README files

The contents typically include one or more of the following:

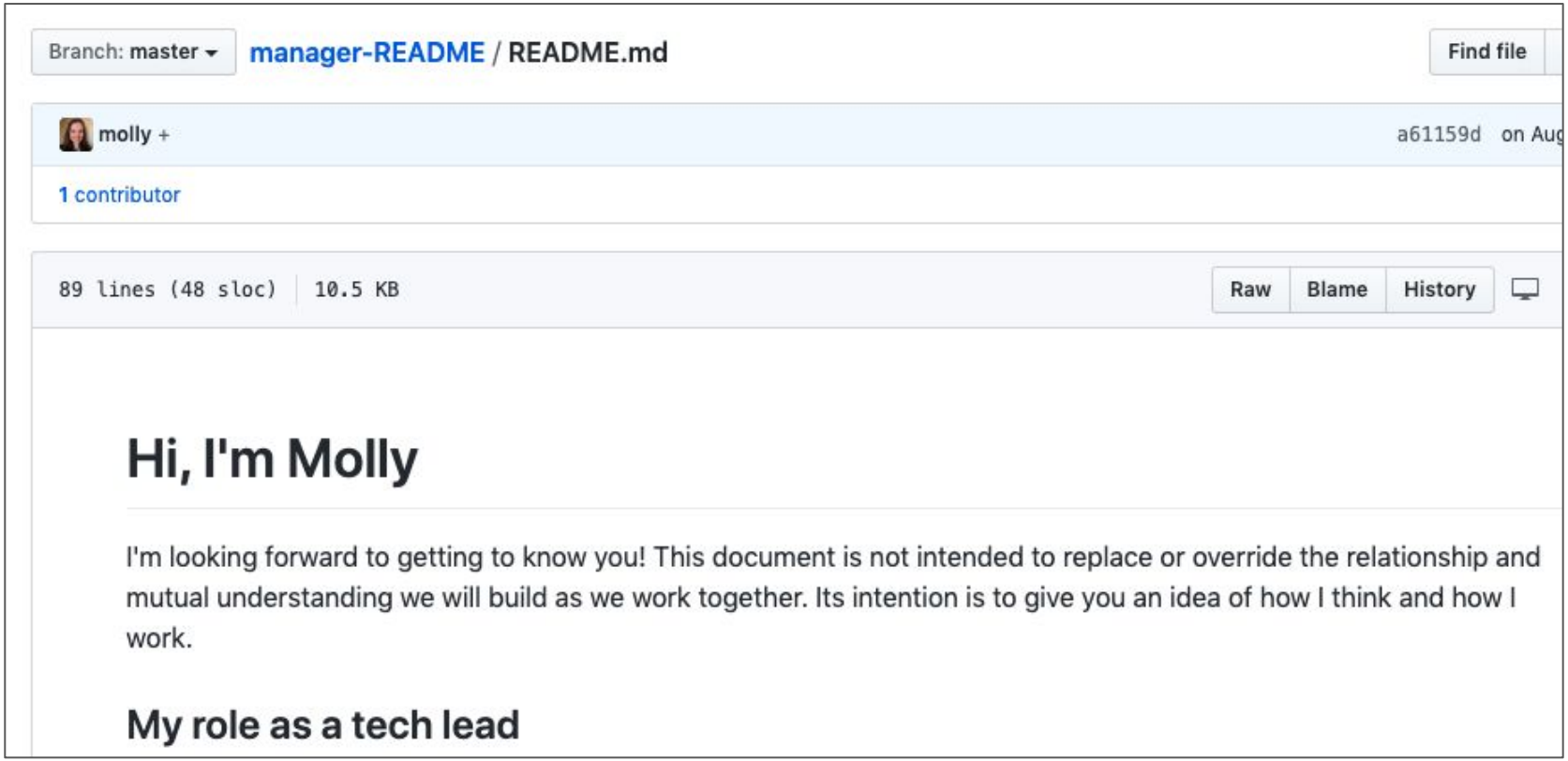
- Configuration instruction
- Installation instructions
- Operating instructions
- A file manifest (list of files included)
- Copyright and licensing information
- Contact information for the distributer or programmer
- Known bugs
- Troubleshooting
- Credits and acknowledgments
- A changelog (usually for programmers)
- A news section (usually for users)

12 “Manager READMEs” from Silicon Valley’s Top Tech Companies

April 4th 2018

TWEET THIS

Personal / Manager README files



Molly, Tech Lead at HubSpot

- My role as tech lead
- Feedback
- One-on-ones
- Performance
- My schedule
- After-hours communication
- A note on diversity and inclusion
- If you need something
- Expectations of you
- My interests

Examples from README files at Tech Companies

“My intent is to accelerate our working relationship with this document.”

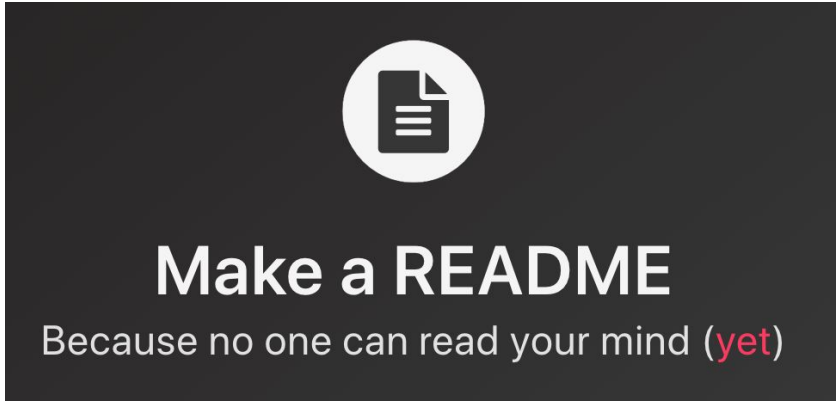
“Do not confuse my quiet with lack of engagement.”

“Expected response times by communication channel…”

“If I fail at any of these - especially anything that puts retaining you at risk - you would be doing me a huge favor by letting me know as soon as possible. I don't expect everyone to stick around forever, however if a departure is potentially due to something we could have done different, I would appreciate the chance to make things right first.”

Use cases for README files

- New employee onboarding
- New team, committee, or department formation
- Relationship management
  - Expectations
  - Personal preferences
- Norm creation



How we picked up the idea of using personal README files

I stole the idea from my boss

...who stole the idea from Big Tech.

Already were doing semi-yearly “Write the Docs” days

My boss shared the idea of personal READme files, and I thought they sounded like a great idea (especially because team communication was an ongoing area for improvement)

We thought Write the Docs Day + Readme files = profit!

How Josh started using Personal README files

Rachel stole the idea from Ashley from D4D last year

More about our teams and how we are using README files

University of Michigan Library's Design & Discovery Department

Rachel Vacek
Head of Design & Discovery

Heidi Burkhardt
Web Project Manager & Content Strategist

Jon Earley
User Interface Design Engineer

Bridget Burke
Front-End Developer & Accessibility Specialist

Ken Varnum
Senior Program Manager

Ben Howell
User Experience & Accessibility Specialist

Eliot Scott
Drupal Developer

Albert Bertram
Web Applications Team Leader

Robyn Ness
Senior UX Specialist

Ellen Schlegelmilch
UI/UX Designer

Heymo Vehse
Web Applications Developer

TBD
Front-End Developer

D&D's areas of focus

- User experience research and design
- Program and project management
- Front-end and back-end development
- Digital accessibility expertise

Design & Discovery's Space

Design & Discovery's Space

Why READMEs for my department?

- Two departments merged into D&D
- People who hadn’t previously worked together were now going to be on multiple teams together
- Lots of staff change
  - New positions
  - Retirement
  - Promotions
  - Reclassifications
  - People moving on/filling vacant positions
- Balance of work/life
- Flexibility in schedules
- Renovation of space and everyone coming together
- Personal preferences for interaction

D&D's README Template

- Name
- Title
- When I started working in the Library
- How I describe my work to someone unfamiliar with the type of work I do
- My communication preferences:
- Favorite hobbies
- Favorite snacks
- I am grateful for
- One adjective to describe you

Rachel Vacek README

Title: Head of Design & Discovery

When I started working in the Library: August 2016

How I describe my work to someone unfamiliar with the type of work I do:
I manage a department of talented people that help make websites more usable and accessible to everyone. Some people on my team are project managers, some talk with users about their interactions with our websites, and some build and design apps and sites. I am their biggest advocate and I provide coaching, remove barriers, and make sure they have the resources they need to be successful in their job. I am a champion for the library's public-facing websites and tools that help people discover and access resources, services, and expertise. I'm also involved in library-wide initiatives where I help people think about and plan for improving the quality of the services they provide.

My communication preferences: I'm a very social person and prefer face-to-face communication. I like to swing by people's desks to see how things are going, but won't do this if they look focused or have on headphones. I like Slack for quick conversations, but not for managing tasks. I'd prefer an email that provides more context and that I can track. I also consider myself approachable, so if I'm in my office and my door is open, come on in - I'm very interruptible. I'll close my door for meetings, phone calls, or if I need to focus on something. Just knock if you really need me for something. I also don't use JIRA or Confluence often because so much of my collaborative work is outside of LIT.

Favorite hobbies: I enjoy playing modern board games, baking, attending plays and musicals, going on long walks in the woods, painting miniatures, going to movies, and hanging out with friends.

Favorite snacks: I like sweet snacks (baked goods) more than salty snacks. I also like veggies, fruit, and cheese. Mmm, cheese.

I am grateful for: the change of seasons, the kindness of others, and opportunities to inspire people and help them recognize their strengths

One adjective to describe me: Enthusiastic

VCUL's Digital Engagement Department

Erin White, Head, Digital Engagement

Katie Condon, Digital Specialist

Student workers, 3-5 digitization, 1 web

Ashley Brewer, Web Systems Librarian

Todd Easter, Web Designer

Cody Whitby, Web Applications Engineer

VCU Libraries Digital Engagement Department

VCU Libraries Digital Engagement READme template

- About Me -- personal information, background, etc
- My job -- describe your job/role in your own words
- Personal pinciples / Values -- share some core beliefs that you think guide your work and are key to understanding where you're coming from
- Communication / Calendar -- What type of communication you prefer for what type of message, i.e. when to email vs when to call (never call) and how to interpret your calendar/drop in-ability
- Feedback (how you give it and how you like to receive it) -- Communication "style" and what style and type of feedback you respond to best
- Favorite foods/snacks -- for when it's your birthday or we have something to celebrate!
- Choose your own adventure!

NC State University Libraries' UX department

Josh Boyer
Department Head, User Experience

Andreas Orphanides
Associate Head, User Experience

Robin Davis
User Experience Librarian

Sarah Hawks
University Library Specialist

Erik Olson
Business & Technology Applications Analyst

Meredith Wynn
Technology Support Specialist

NC State University Libraries' UX department

NC State's README file template

- Name
- Title
- When I started working at NC State University Libraries
- My job, in my own words
- About me (personal background stuff, like where we're from, hobbies, favorite snacks, whatever is important to share)
- My communication preferences (meetings, email, F2F)
- My use of social media that I choose to talk about in this context
- My managerial style / What I appreciate from a supervisor
- What I think about noise and interruptions
- I'm saying "do not disturb" when I

NC State's README file template, continued

- When working with me, it's good to know that
- My super power for getting things done
- The primary persona I think of as the audience for my work
- Other ways of describing me that may mean something to you (Myers-Briggs, Leadership frame, Hogwarts house, Enneagram, Parks and Recreation, Birth chart, etc.)
- A boring fact about me
- I am grateful for
- [Feel free to add prompts of your own]

How personal READMEs have helped us

How README files have helped Michigan

- Created an opportunity for my staff to express what's important to them as well as to learn what's important to their colleagues
- Helped with onboarding and getting to know people, including those that work remotely more frequently
- Increased awareness of one another’s communication styles and how they do/don’t like to be interrupted

- Acknowledged people’s snack preferences, and that for most of my department, coffee IS superior to snacks (and that I shouldn’t trivialize it with such a designation)

How README files have helped VCU

- Bagels > donuts, not @ me!
- Great onboarding tool.
- It allowed us to articulate things that are important but might be hard to say.
- Gives us something to refer back to and consider
- Writing them and reading each other’s helped us feel connected

How README files have helped VCU

(starts coming ‘round the corner to Ashley’s office)
Hey, Ash what’s --

(Is eating. Glares.)

*(*Slowly backs away….*)*

How README files have helped NC State

Andreas Orphanides, associate department head

How README files have helped NC State

Dre’s README file: “I’m very good at really big picture thinking and at nitty gritty details. I've got a bit of a blind spot between these two extremes.”

How README files have helped NC State

Dre’s README file: “I’m very good at really big picture thinking and at nitty gritty details. I've got a bit of a blind spot between these two extremes.”

Josh’s README file: “I complement Dre with my medium-picture thinking.”

How README files have helped NC State

- Onboarding new staff
- Allows us to say things we wouldn't otherwise say, for example:

  "I advise you to build a portfolio of work that is a mix of your projects, projects that came from me and other supervisors, our team's projects, and ones we do to support our colleagues and the Libraries."

How README files have helped NC State

How README files have helped NC State

How README files have helped NC State

Our boring facts:

- “My favorite drink is Orangina.”
- “The route I drive to work is not the same route that I drive home.”
- “I don't like beets.”
- “I'm pretty good at making paper snowflakes!”
- “My favorite band is U2.”

Discussion

1. How have your you used tools like personal README files to help with communication, onboarding, team formation, or relationship management?
2. What opportunities do you see with personal README files helping you, your team, or your work environment?
3. What challenges do you think you might have with using personal README files in your work environment?
4. What tacit understandings and misunderstandings among team members could be improved if people wrote down how they work best?
5. What additional ideas do you have to add to the personal README file template(s)?

Thanks!

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