Write a README people actually read

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ABSTRACT

A README is the landing page of your code. Four questions to answer in order, plus a template for open-source projects, client handovers and internal tools.

Keywords: writing, documentation, open-source

> **TL;DR**
>
> A good README answers four questions in order: what is this, why should I care, how do I run it, and where do I go next. Everything else is optional.

I've handed over a lot of client projects, and I've inherited even more. The difference between a two-hour onboarding and a two-day one is almost always the README.

The four questions

1. **What is this?**

   One sentence, at the very top, that a non-engineer could understand. *"A multi-tenant school management system built with Laravel and React."*

2. **Why should I care?**

   Two or three bullet points on what it does or what problem it solves. A screenshot is worth a thousand words here.

3. **How do I run it?**

   The exact commands, copy-pasteable, from a fresh clone to a running app. Test them on a clean machine.

```
git clone https://github.com/you/project && cd project
cp .env.example .env
composer install && npm install
php artisan key:generate && php artisan migrate --seed
composer run dev
```

4. **Where next?**

   Links to deeper docs, the architecture overview, how to contribute and who to ask.

What to leave out

- **History.** How the project evolved belongs in a changelog or a blog post.
- **Every config option.** Link to a reference doc instead.
- **Badges for the sake of badges.** Keep the ones that tell the reader something, like build status.

> **The new-hire test**
>
> Ask the newest person on the team to set the project up using only the README, and sit beside them without helping. Every question they ask is a missing line.

A template

`README.md`

```
# Project name

One sentence: what it is and who it is for.

![Screenshot](docs/screenshot.png)

## Features
- The three things it does best

## Quick start
(exact commands)

## Configuration
Required environment variables, with examples.

## Architecture
A short paragraph and a link to docs/architecture.md

## Contributing · License · Contact
```

> **Key takeaways**
>
> - What, why, how to run, where next. In that order.
> - Commands must be copy-pasteable and tested on a clean machine.
> - Run the new-hire test before every handover.

CITE AS

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