



Online Help Systems

Position Paper

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Key Points

- **Increasingly complex applications require help systems to serve the needs of all users, no matter what their capabilities, efficiently.**
 - **Well-structured help files can reduce your support costs.**
 - **Properly written online help systems enable users to find the information they need, which increases customer satisfaction.**
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Whenever a user tries and fails to achieve something using a software application, time is wasted. This downtime can translate into considerable costs for your customers.

Why provide properly written and well-structured help files?

As software becomes easier and easier to use, is there still a need for help documentation? Why is a help system important?

No matter how intuitive the design of a software application, users still will have questions about its functionality, design and content. A well-designed and comprehensive help system is a key component of usability. Traditionally, the help system is the first place users will turn for assistance.

Therefore, the goal of including a help system with your product is to provide answers to users' questions, in the users' language(s). However, simply providing a help system is not enough; the content must be well structured, properly written, and comprehensive. Novice and expert users must be able to find the information they are looking for quickly and easily.

In addition to increasing user satisfaction with your application, help systems can dramatically reduce calls to your customer support teams.

In fact, high support costs very often can be traced to poor user documentation. If your users cannot solve an issue themselves on the first try, they will pick up the phone and make you solve it for them. Typically, a call to customer support can cost the vendor between \$10 and \$30, whereas providing an online help system can cost just a few cents per user to maintain and update as needed. Organizations that have invested in quality online help systems realize a significant return on investment (ROI).

Benefits of online help versus other formats

An online help system provides users with a context-sensitive, easy-to-browse, printable tool to help them use your application better. Online help is widely accessed; indeed, most people who have used a computer have utilized an online help system at some point.



Remember the last time you could not do something in Microsoft Word? Did you find and then page through the printed document, or did you simply access Microsoft Word Help from the Help menu?

An online help system does not describe the various dialogs and features of an application; it describes the tasks the user can perform.

For the development organization, online help reduces printing and storage costs. Further, it is much easier and cheaper to maintain than printed documents, and it can be modified up to the last minute of the software development process.

In principle, you can omit printed documentation if you provide online user documentation, but it is often a good idea to provide a printed “Getting Started” document to help familiarize the user with the software application. For example, your printed document might contain installation instructions and a general description of the application, while your online help provides more detailed information on functionalities, commands, dialog fields, and parameters.

Some vendors choose to provide comprehensive sets of both online and printed documentation. By leveraging technology, information from a single source can be delivered in hardcopy and in a variety of online formats such as SGML, XML, HTML, PDF, and plain text.

Online help overview

An online help system consists of a toolbar, content pane and navigation pane. It displays specific topics which are connected to other topics by hyperlinks. The user can access any particular piece of information directly from various points in the help system by clicking a hyperlink.

You should carefully plan the structure of your online help before you actually start writing any help topics.

A good way to build an online help system is to move from general information to specific details, so that users can drill down into more in-depth information as necessary. Virtually all help systems enable users to find information they need by providing sophisticated navigational features, including a dynamic table of contents, a multilevel index, and a full-text search utility.

Topic types

The type of the help topic determines the way it is structured, in which window of the help engine it is displayed, and how it is accessed. Help topics vary in scope from dialog-specific to field-specific.



The following table provides some examples of typical topic types:

Overview	Provides general information about the application. Links to other overview topics, dialog topics, and troubleshooting topics.
Dialog overview	Describes the function of a dialog box and displays a list of buttons with links to task topics, overview topics, and parameter lists.
Procedure	Describes a task that can be performed with the application. A procedure topic is not necessarily bound to any particular dialog.
Field help	Provides a brief explanation of an interface control or program parameter.
Troubleshooting	General troubleshooting topics provide information on avoiding or handling typical problem situations. Error message topics indicate the reason for a particular error message and the steps needed to continue.
Glossary	Provides a brief definition of a concept or term.

Documentation must deliver a clear, concise message to the reader.

Applying structure to the writing of your help systems

Online help systems need to be consistent so that readers do not get confused. Most companies use an internal style guide to give writers some parameters for the desired style and tone. However, individual interpretation and variations in overall style still occur.

This issue can be handled by introducing a Controlled English (CE) environment that regulates the language of the individual writers.

CE works on a very simple principle: By controlling the source language you can:

- Improve quality
- Enforce the use of consistent and correct terminology
- Produce a consistent writing style
- Leverage these same benefits in all subsequent language versions.

CE addresses these issues by employing a standardized terminology database and technology known as a “parsing engine” at the time of writing. This engine analyzes the text as it is being created and scores it against a set of internal “rules” that govern the desired degree of control. For example, Screen, Monitor, VDU, and Display are all valid terms, but for consistency’s sake only one should be used in your help documentation. When a segment of text conflicts with the approved terminology or exceeds the defined structural parameters, the system highlights the segment and offers recommendations for revision. In this way, writers learn as they write, ultimately adapting their style to conform to the requirements.



Stylistic, grammatical and terminological inconsistencies are exposed and compounded each time the material is translated into a new language.

By applying the same rules and terminology across an entire writing engagement, you can ensure the delivery of a highly consistent document suite to your customers, regardless of which resources actually write the content. For more information about CE, please see our Controlled English position paper, available via our website.

Once an online help system reaches a certain level of stability (usually after the Review Draft has been composed), you can localize it into other languages. As term and structure consistency improves, so too does the ability to apply systems such as Machine/Computer Assisted Translation (MAT/CAT). By translating larger amounts of your source text using these systems, you can improve the turnaround time dramatically on large projects while reducing the overall cost.

Many large software vendors are employing CE. By implementing CE from the outset of the document writing process for an application and associated online help system, these organizations gain substantial return on investment (ROI) as the documents are localized into dozens of languages.

Summary

Planning an online help system is a key step in the documentation process. Creating a well-defined structure for the system before writing any content makes the authoring process easier and more logical.

Creating an online help system manually takes a lot of time and effort. Outsourcing this development to industry experts with the experience and capacity to deliver not only saves time and money, but also helps ensure that your online documentation is well-structured and easy to localize.



About LT

L10N Technology (LT) is the leading provider of translation, localization, technical writing and interpretation services that enable businesses to deliver locally relevant and culturally connected products, services and communications anywhere in the world. Companies throughout the world use our solutions to help grow their businesses in the Americas, Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Our scalable end-to-end solutions can help accelerate a company's time to market while improving the quality and consistency of the company's products and services. Our wide range of clients include leading businesses in information technology, automotive, e-learning, life sciences, entertainment, telecommunications, aerospace and power and utilities industries.

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