Chapter 13
Using Standards to Promote Collaboration among Writers

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ABSTRACT
Unlike mathematicians who have a quasi-universal language for expressing formulas and other mathematical expressions, writers can express ideas in many different ways. Differences in style appear at multiple levels: in the section and chapter organizational patterns, in the syntax, in the complexity of the vocabulary, and in formatting. Consistency is required to produce publications of quality in a collaborative environment; moreover, writers must find efficient ways to collaborate as a team. This chapter explores the methods, advantages, and challenges of developing standards—rules related to content, work processes, and the choice and configuration of tools to support collaborative writing and content reuse in virtual environments.

INTRODUCTION
Computer networks, document repositories, databases, and communication technologies can make documents and their content accessible to multiple writers independently from their various geographical locations. Content management systems (CMSs) can manage access rights, versions, and the workflows that support the cycles of document creation, maintenance, and publishing. These systems also have the ability to notify writers other collaborators when changes are made to the content or status of documents.

Because it is common to find similar content within many documents, many tools even enable writers to manage content reuse across multiple publications. For example, a product’s training manual may contain many of the tasks or feature descriptions defined in the user’s reference guide. The same is true when products of the same family share similar functionalities or physical components. With access to a decent search engine, writers can find and reuse content that has been written by others. They may even review and propose changes to
existing content within the common virtual work environment.

With today’s technologies, it is possible to reference existing content instead of using the traditional cut-and-paste feature (see Chapter 14). When content is referenced, a permanent link that pulls content in, as opposed to a hyperlink that directs the reader to a new location, is maintained, allowing all publications to be updated when the original content is modified and updated. Depending on the rules and regulations of the technology used in each organization and industry, the updates to content may or may not require approval before changes are applied. Besides increased consistency, the most obvious advantage of reuse by reference is decreased time and cost needed for maintaining and localizing content: write it once, update it once, and localize it once.

In the technical publication industry where maintenance (modify + re-localize) is often as big a part of the publication process as creating original content and where the ability exists to publish updated content as soon as the product is ready for release, reuse can become quite a competitive advantage. However, technologies alone are insufficient to make reuse happen. Computer mediated communication (cmc) technology opens the door to collaborative writing. Because collaboration among writers is not easy to achieve, as indicated in Chapter 10 about optimizing team performance, their publications can become compromised if team interactions are not effective. In this way, creating good publications is like baking muffins. Publications and muffins are made of multiple ingredients, but both are actually greater than the sum of their parts. Muffins are all made of similar ingredients that are measured and mixed until they have good consistency. Similarly, publications are made of content units (chapters, sections, paragraphs, sentences, phrases, and words) that are put together in publications that should have a consistent writing style and a uniform look and feel.

Discrepancies in writing styles limit collaboration. They make it difficult to create a single publication without extensive re-editing cycles. If the differences are not smoothed at the outset, they will have to be done later in the process. In the technical publications industry where the documentation is one of the last things to be finalized before a product can be put on the market, cleanup at the end of the production line usually means publishing incomplete information, pushing up deadlines, dealing with higher costs, or learning to live with low quality publications that may increase the number of e-mail and support calls, or affect the perception of the product.

Inconsistent content also reduces opportunities for reuse by reference. Good writers who work collaboratively to ensure consistency and quality in general will not include content in their deliverables if it does not match their writing styles or their reader requirements. At best, writers will copy-and-paste the desired information and modify it to meet their own needs. At worse, they will recreate the entire information set. But neither of these options is efficient. To ensure efficiency, the organization must constantly and consistently support writers in their effort to collaborate and reuse content. If they cannot find content or share it easily, they will focus on their own content, processes, and deadlines.

These challenges demonstrate the need for having standards that are recognized and shared among writers collaborating, particularly in virtual settings like that made possible through a CMS. How a team can work together to improve work practices and reduce inconsistencies is what standards are all about. Ensuring consistency and effective collaborative interactions requires a culture of collaboration and strong leadership, the first two principles of virtual collaborative writing.
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