Chapter 14
Developing Content in a Reuse Environment

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ABSTRACT

The need for reusing content and automating the writing process to gain efficiency in workplace environments is a priority in many work settings. Writing teams seek effective strategies for integrating reuse principles, and increasingly they need to accomplish this work virtually. Reusing content across an organization requires coordinated collaboration in terms of both establishing standards and ensuring that all team members follow those standards. In view of this high-level requirement, setting up a reuse environment seems familiar; that is, developing and implementing a style guide to promote consistency always has been central to good technical writing. Also familiar is the fact that as long as there have been style guides, adherence to them has been difficult to achieve. What makes a reuse environment different from those less focused on reuse is that degree to which standardization among writers must occur. Whereas style guidelines typically have emphasized word or phrasing nuances, standards for reuse move beyond terminology or syntax, involving all aspects of the writing process. An effective reuse environment thus depends on collaborative input from writing teams, which poses significant challenges in virtual environments. This chapter provides insight into the principles of reuse and how virtual collaboration is essential to making content reusable.

INTRODUCTION

Whether to Rewrite or Reuse Content

For writers who have had to remember every document that contains the same content, the possibility of reusing what is already written—not having to document material from scratch—sounds like a vast improvement in the practice of developing content. What value is there in having numerous writers create the same content multiple times? Not only is such a practice inefficient, but doing so risks confusing readers if each writer offers a slightly different view...
of the same concept. Unfortunately, this outcome is inevitable without the strategic reuse of content; an even worse outcome would be contradictory content created by two different writers.

Consider, for example, the customer who purchased both a personal computer and a printer that has advanced features for handling graphics. The computer arrived and was easy to set up, but the printer posed problems. Because it was not a standard printer, the cable included would not fit any of the ports. This setback prompted a call to customer support, and, after much discussion, the customer learned that a dongle was needed to connect the printer to the computer. Once the necessary adapter arrived, the customer read the instructions about how to use it to connect the printer and the computer. Somewhat confused by what she read, the customer also looked at the original instructions that came with the printer. The instructions that came with the dongle completely contradicted the instructions that came with the printer. Because neither set of instructions helped her connect the printer, her only recourse was to contact customer support again so someone could walk her successfully through the process.

This experience highlights the problem that occurs when there are relationships between products, but the writers who create documentation about these products do not collaborate. In this example, if the writer who wrote the printer content spoke with the writer who wrote the dongle content, they may have been able to develop reusable content in support of both products that would have helped the customer connect her printer. Yet, collaboration between writers working on related products or even the same product is sporadic for the many reasons indicated in this book. Finding ways to enable collaboration so that writers can create reusable content is essential for establishing an effective reuse environment.

This chapter provides writers and writing teams who are considering implementing content reuse background information on the meaning and evolution of reuse. It describes principles underlying an information development methodology that incorporates reuse and single-sourcing as fundamental precepts. It reveals that collaboration among writers, who often work virtually, is an essential requirement for making reuse possible. Writers must work together to determine the architecture required to operate in such an environment. For instance, what types of information products are needed to address customer questions: user guides, configuration manuals, installation instructions, and online help? More specifically, writers must collaborate to determine what units of content are required to make up the information products, and how the units will be organized. As shown in the example earlier, if writers do not collaborate during the process of developing content, the information about products that are related can be conflicting, inaccurate, and contradictory—all of which can have a negative effect on readers. As mentioned elsewhere in this book, the move from book writing to writing reusable topics is a shift in paradigm for writers. Accordingly, the principles of collaboration that are most relevant to developing reusable content include creating a culture of collaboration and providing effective leadership to help writers accustomed to working independently to adopt this different approach to developing content (see Principles 1 and 2, Chapter 1).

Thus, this chapter provides virtual collaboration guidance about how to implement the principles of reuse and single-sourcing in order to implement reuse across information products. Because collaboration among writers is an essential component of a reuse strategy, the sections that follow refer to methods of collaboration and critical points in the reuse process where close collaboration is needed. The example considered later pertains to a project involving three writers who are documenting the information products for a matching washer and dryer. This example is best considered in the context of various elements of reuse.