Searching for Good Help?

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On-line help authoring tools are the genies that can help you make the transition from hard copy to screen documentation. This article describes the lessons learned from a search for effective and efficient on-line help authoring software. It is a look "behind the screen" to describe what to look for in an on-line help writing package and also how help can enhance and modernize documentation.

H ELP. HAVE YOU EVER USED SUPPLEMENTARY application software that made you want to pull out your hair? Did it make you want to use a few expletives or question your abilities? This article records knowledge and experience gleaned from using one such conglomeration of programmed overlays, paths, and interfaces. This article is not a mystery but a look at on-line help authoring applications from a writer or a user's perspective rather than from a technical evaluator's.

On-Line Help Defined

If you are looking for an on-line help authoring package or have never used one, these experiences may prove helpful. Most help tools use or overlay Microsoft Word™ and Microsoft On-Line Help™ to make it easy to write your own on-line help for your project or system. Writing on-line reports and documentation with embedded jumps, indexing, pop-ups, definitions, cross-referencing, and navigation can be a relatively easy task with the proper tool. The term "on-line" here refers to a report or document displayed on the screen after the inclusion of the above features. Such a product would be on line in the conventional sense only when it was connected to a local-area network, wide-area network, Intranet, or Internet.

Two sample screens will demonstrate how on-line help works. Figure 1 shows the table of contents for a section in a user's manual. The user selects a subject and the program goes to the specific paragraph. Note that no help programming characters are shown on this screen but are in Figure 2, "Civil Engineer Material System (CEMAS) Control File," a sample jump. In these examples, the traditional decimal paragraph numbers were retained, and the text was condensed. You may be able to further improve your documents.

Modernizing Documentation

Using a help authoring package in the documentation arena can enable you to modernize and condense the required "standardese" content of document formats. You can compose your original with the help authoring application. It will allow you to write the required paragraphs with the facts, guidelines, and instructions in easy-to-read, well-spaced lists or action subparagraphs with little running text. You can jump to a definition, figure, or an attachment for more information to facilitate brevity in your text. An on-line help authoring tool

set can also be used to improve and enhance your documentation with pop-up boxes and cross-referencing.

Empowering the User

You may also transport and edit down an existing draft. At the porting point, if you do not modernize the style of your document, you can almost lose the reason for on-line documentation. Remember to empower your users—with an on-line help authoring tool, standards can be met in plain screen English. The user can move from general to specific and back without turning pages, and reading time can be cut in half. You can go to a definition and back again and then to related information with ease, accuracy, and speed. The documentation can more

Figure 1. *Screen 1. Table of contents in user's manual.*

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SECTION 6. CEMAS FILE MAINTENANCE
   CEMAS System Access Table of Contents:
6.1       CEMAS System Access
6.1.1       CEMAS Identification File (MIDF)
6.1.1.1       Add/Inquire-ID Number Program (MIDFUD)
6.1.1.2       Identification Number Update Screen
6.1.1.3       Identification Number Add Screen
6.1.2       CEMAS Processing File (MPRO)
6.1.3       CEMAS Control File (MCTL)
6.1.4       CEMAS Program Access
6.1.4.1       CEMAS Master Menu Program (MCEMMENU)
6.1.4.2       CEMAS System Administrator Program (MCEMSSA)
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Figure 2. *Screen 2. Paragraph from the selection in Screen 1. Note: The characters "#$+K" are software-generated codes that establish the location and indexing of this paragraph. The paragraph number and title are automatically bolded and the text appears as shown here. In a finished help file, you would not see the coding shown here for illustration.*

```
#$+K   6.1.3 CEMAS CONTROL FILE (MCTL).

The MCTL file is used to store control information for
CEMAS operations. This record contains such information as

  • End-of-Day (EOD) flag to indicate if EOS is processing.
  • Document Serial Numbers to be used in assigning document
    numbers to transactions.
  • CEMAS Stock List (CSL) number to be assigned to the next
    record added to the Noun Dictionary file.
  • Printer numbers used in printing products.

The information in the file is displayed on the CEMAS Base
Variable screens.
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closely match the system and its inherent features when you apply some editing skill with a good on-line help authoring package. Remember, when you write you are building in the navigation, which becomes as easy as a mouse click for the user.

The First Attempt

When we started our relational database project with a major database management system, it appeared that we would have a computer-assisted software engineering tool to help us generate the documentation. The system did produce context-sensitive information from the hierarchical and attribute realms but stopped there. This led to searches for on-line help authoring tools to create documentation outside the main tool suite.

After some inquiries, we found a small help authoring application and started our project. This package, however, did not live up to its billing or our expectations. At times, when using our first help tool set, some of the commands that called in a template to set up a file did not work. Sometimes the indexing would have errors that were difficult to correct if a particular file in a series had an error. This error, in turn, would cause problems later in navigating from a subject to related material or to another subject. Setup commands and sometimes table of contents commands had to be repeated, which was both time-consuming and frustrating. This had a multiplier effect in relation to time and effort; however, we did complete a few small help files.

The Second Attempt

After pushing our first small system and ourselves almost to the limits with the first product, we searched the Web for another package. We found one with a good tutorial that taught from initial setup to full creation of a dummy help file. It included jumps, hot spots, indexing, and generally explained the whole package along the way.

Finding a help tool with a good range of capabilities proved highly beneficial. We had found an on-line help authoring package that was easy to use, accurate, and efficient in doing its job. The interactive tutoring enabled the creation of a dummy file and also the changing of an actual file into one with on-line help. It also included the ability to import figures. The limitation in the demonstration copy was that it only allowed 10 topics. Nevertheless, using the application helped us arrive at an objective decision whether to use it. We could also use a real file for practice with the tutorial—a real plus. As a result, we were able to go from package evaluation to project completion with less work and more accuracy; at this point we felt we had a good on-line help authoring tool set.

Lessons Learned

Our two experiences with on-line help authoring tools taught us the following principles.

Know What You Need

Take a close look at the papers or documents you are going to write. What features do you wish to include? Examine some text with on-line help included; this will give you an idea of what is available. To avoid the snags and pitfalls we encountered, thoroughly investigate the capabilities and shortcomings of any "help" for on-line help authoring package before you purchase it.

Get a Demonstration Copy

Get a demonstration copy if you can; some companies have "demo" copies available for download from the Web. This can save you both headaches and money, and it is also a good way to evaluate a software package before you buy it.

Make an Informed Decision

When you find a good package, complete the tutorial, then ask two or more co-workers to use it and give you their assessments. If you are not able to download a demonstration copy, study all the advertisements you can find on a product and call, write, or E-mail for more information. The bottom line is to make an informed decision. A decision made on one lone recommendation could cause a lot of aggravation.

Shop Around

If you decide to do an on-line help authoring document, first analyze what you want to do. Do you need jumps, pop-up boxes, indexing, attachments, table of contents, etc.? After a thorough analysis, start looking for an on-line help tool set that has the capabilities you want and that also has a good tutorial. Do your homework first, then start your search. Computer magazines and catalogs have hundreds of advertisements. We found the general price range was from $350 to $750 depending on the desired features and the complexities of the project. ◆

About the Author

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