



## Writing User-Focused Online Help

One of the most commonly heard end-user complaints about online Help is “this isn't helpful!” Writing online Help content is easy—writing *good* online Help content is something else again. However sophisticated it might be, no website, service, or piece of software is better than your users' ability to understand it, and that makes good Help a powerful weapon in the war against customer attrition. Here are a few best practices for planning Help content that will keep your users happy even when they run into problems.

- **Who are they and what do they know?**

Who are the members of your audience, and what is their level of expertise? The answers to those questions will affect not only the tone of your writing, but its scope and granularity as well. If your audience is composed mostly of novice users, they'll obviously need a lot more hand-holding than a more advanced audience. It's no more advisable to explain to an audience of 10-year-olds how to edit their registry keys than it is to provide elementary information about command prompts to an audience of seasoned web developers.

- **Identify important points, and don't drown the user**

Once you've identified your audience, the next goal is to determine what they need help with. You'll probably already have a list of the various user tasks for your product, but don't fall into the trap of thinking that every task needs its own Help topic. In any Help system, you can generally bet that about 80 percent of the users' problems will be solved by about 20 percent of the content. The key is to focus on the important pain points without drowning the user in a sea of superfluous information.

Use any data that you can get your hands on—from focus groups, from usability studies, or from any forum in which real people have used the product and provided specific feedback. Also, use the product yourself, and make note of which tasks are easy to complete and which ones are more demanding. Remember that your objective is to make the product accessible to its target audience, not to yourself. Just because *you* can perform a task without confusion doesn't necessarily mean that your target audience can. Therefore, constantly ask yourself “if I were a member of my target audience, would I have had trouble with that?” In this way you can generate a list of the primary tasks that users are most likely to encounter problems with, and that will comprise your initial list of Help topics.

- **Keep it simple**

There are a great many resources to assist you in writing optimal Help content, but there are two overarching rules to follow at both the topic level and the project level.

- **Simplicity and consistency**

Among any audience, there'll always be a range of literacy skills. By keeping your sentence structures simple and your wording internally consistent, you'll greatly increase overall understanding. As a writer, it can be tedious to use the same phrasing over and over again, but standard wording and formatting practices make it quicker and easier for your audience to find answers. These practices have also been demonstrated to increase user satisfaction ratings.

- **Keep it procedural**

In practice, users rarely want to hear about all the nuts and bolts of a product. Most users don't go to Help for an education—they go there because they have a specific problem to solve or task to complete, and they want an answer fast. As a rule of thumb, try to stick to a ratio of 20 percent conceptual information to 80 percent procedural information.

Like all writing tasks, creating Help content is as much an art as a science; there's no simple formula or template that will offer a universally effective solution. But if you keep your focus on your audience at every stage—planning, writing, publishing, and beyond—you'll go a long way toward creating that rarest of beasts: the Help system that's actually helpful.