STRUCTURED AUTHORING

What is structured authoring?

Definition

Structured authoring is a way of writing in which you use:

- components ("information building blocks") determined by an information model
- standards, rules and guidelines to structure your text

Usage

You can apply structured authoring to all kinds of texts, regardless of which software application you use. This means that you can apply structured authoring to:

- word processors, such as Microsoft Word
- desktop publishing software, such as Adobe InDesign or Adobe FrameMaker
- help authoring tools, such as MadCap Flare
- XML editors, such as oXygen XML Author, JustSystems XMetaL or FontoXML
- wikis, such as Confluence or MediaWiki

What is an information model?

Definition

An information model is a formal description of an information product's structure and components:

- An information product can be a "document" such as a manual or a work instruction, but it can also be an online help, an intranet or a knowledge base.
- Examples of components include headings, warnings, tables, illustrations, (un)ordered lists …
- The structure defines the components' order and hierarchy.

An information model also contains rules on how to structure the content. For instance:

- A topic is the basic information unit.
- A topic can be divided into multiple sections.
- A topic must have a title.
- A section can have a title, but it is not mandatory.
- An unordered list (aka bulleted list) must contain at least two items.

Templates

In structured authoring, we follow a predefined information model that describes the structure of the content and provides a limited set of elements that can be used in a text. Based on this information model, we create templates to facilitate the authoring process. There are various types of templates: style-based templates for structured authoring in Word and templates with elements for XML editors.

ⓕ flow

Information types

We distinguish various types of information that we want to present to the reader. What does a given concept mean (conceptual information)? How can the user perform a given task (task information)? Which (technical) specifications or data are required to perform a given task (reference information)?

By identifying and grouping these information types we filter texts so readers don't have to do that anymore during reading.

Information units

The basic information unit is a "topic": a short piece of text restricted to one single subject. Each topic belongs to one specific information type (concept, task, reference …). Topics can easily be combined to form larger information units such as chapters and parts, but they can also be divided into smaller pieces like sections, steps, …

Best practices

We apply the following best practices in structured authoring:

- Chunking
- Coherence
- Accurate headings
- Minimalism
- Consistency
- Illustrations and animations
- User-oriented authoring ("profiling")
- Hierarchical organisation

Chunking

Split up lengthy blocks of content (sections) into several smaller information units to make the information more accessible. Use information types, titles and subtitles, tables and lists.

Coherence

Only mention information that is relevant to the reader and keep related information together, both on a micro level, for example on a page, and on a macro level, for instance an entire manual or a knowledge base.

Accurate headings

Use short, meaningful titles that express the quintessence of the message. Readers must be able to scan a document through its titles and quickly find the relevant information.

Minimalism

Provide just enough information to be able to accomplish a task or grasp a given concept. Avoid redundant information and repetitions. One of the benefits of minimalism is that your text will contain less words, leading to considerable savings in translation costs.

Consistency

Use only one term for one concept (terminological consistency) and be consistent with punctuation, layout and structure. This is where information models and templates or XML schemas prove their value.

Illustrations and animations

Illustrate concepts, processes, procedures and objects with different types of visual aids such as flowcharts, process diagrams, exploded views and video animations.

User-oriented authoring ("profiling")

Compose your text in layers, depending on the user profile and the level of detail needed.

Hierarchical organization

Organize the information building blocks (sections, topics, chapters …) logically, consistently and coherently to create a tree structure that is accessible from various angles.