

# Editing in a Single-Source Environment

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*The trend in the technical documentation community is toward single-sourcing: reusing common bits of information. This paper examines the role of the editor in this process, and the effect it has on traditional editorial practices.*

Technical documentation in many areas is moving toward a single-source environment. Advantages to single-sourcing include:

- Eliminating redundancy
- Improving consistency
- Reducing the chance for error
- Improving productivity of writers and reviewers
- Making translation more efficient and less costly

Working in a single source environment means many changes for the writers of the material, and also changes for editors.

**Note** – While most of the information in this paper applies generally to single-source editing regardless of method or tools, some points assume a database of reusable modules.

## ADDITIONS TO TRADITIONAL EDITING TASKS

The editor is still responsible for text editing and development structure of the documentation. In addition to these traditional editing tasks, the editor may also need to:

- Examine the context of modules carefully, as material has not been written in a continuous stream
- Learn the tools being used and their effect on documentation creation and production
- Be familiar with existing modules so as to be able to recommend possible reuse where appropriate
- Know the documentation deliverables well enough to suggest possible reuse of text

## THE EDITOR'S ROLE

The editor has an important role to play in the planning and execution of a single-source strategy. The editor's expertise comes into play in:

- Determining what to reuse
- Developing style guidelines
- Participating in implementation teams
- Editing modules
- Editing text containing modules

Depending on the work flow of the particular organization, the editor might also help track ownership of modules, and note changes to the product or release that might necessitate changes in individual modules.

### *Determining What to Reuse*

Editorial input can help determine the overall strategy of the size of a reusable chunk, and the types of information that most lend themselves to reuse.

The editor usually has the advantage of seeing more than one book in a set, or books across sets. This familiarity with existing material helps when deciding what text, procedures, or descriptions are repeated in books and online help or across documentation sets.

The editor should also keep in mind when material is not appropriate for reuse. For example, if the content:

- Requires contextual information that would not be appropriate for a more generic presentation
- Is so specific that it is not likely to be needed in other locations

### *Developing Style Guidelines*

A single-source strategy only works if the material being reused conforms to style standards. Modules must work together seamlessly, and appear to the reader as if they were written by a single person.

The editor can help establish and enforce these style standards. Besides the usual corporate style guidelines, standards should be drawn up for each type of information (procedures, descriptions, conceptual text, and the like). These standards should work in all environments in which the text may be used: online help, tutorials, and written documentation being the most prevalent.

## ***Participating in Implementation Teams***

The editor should participate in teams that determine modifications or expansion of the single-source model. Often, these teams consist only of tools personnel, who might not see the editorial or writing implications of decisions that are made. Even if writers participate on these teams, they sometimes only know or can present their own project's needs or procedures. Editors are familiar with overall company style and often work with more than one writing group, so the viewpoint they present can be more useful and comprehensive.

Participation on these teams also means that the editor can more clearly understand tool, template, and implementation requirements. This can help when editing modules, and prevent the editor from asking the writer for modifications that are not possible given the tool or implementation scheme. Also, the participating editor can pass this information on to other editors.

## ***Editing Individual Modules***

When editing individual modules, the editor should make sure that the content:

- Conforms to company style guidelines
- Is generic for use in different contexts
- Is accurate

## ***Editing Text Containing Modules***

When editing text in which modules are used, the editor should make sure the module:

- Is appropriate for the context
- Matches the style and audience level of surrounding text
- Is accurate for the product and release version

## **CONCLUSION**

As the industry moves toward single-sourcing, the editor has an important role to play in helping to determine what material should be reused, making sure that the content of the material adheres to company style guidelines, and ensuring that the material is reused appropriately

## **REFERENCES**

Rockley, Ann, and Hackos, JoAnn, "Designing Single Source Materials," *Proceedings of the Society for Technical Communication 46th Annual Conference*, May 16 - 19, Cincinnati, OH, 1999, pp 53 - 55.

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