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Society for Technical Communication

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
 Arlington, Virginia 22203-1822
 (703) 522-4114 (703) 522-2075 fax
 Send questions and correspondence to the editor at the above address.

General Information about STC:

stc@stc.org

www.stc.org

Address Changes: **membership@stc.org**

Intercom Editorial: **intercom@stc.org**

Intercom Advertising: **david.baker@wt-group.com**

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viewpoint

Online Help? Or Not!

By PATRICIA A. CARMEL, *Senior Member, Israel Chapter*

Technical communicators are committed to precision and accuracy. We hone our skills and deliberate with great earnestness the use of one word over another in order to be true to our mission: imparting a clear and unambiguous message to our users.

However, we are often somewhat less committed when using terminology within the industry. Do you mean what I mean when I use a certain term? Do we use different terms and mean the same thing? Consider a project my group recently completed involving Online Help.

Our project consisted of converting information from a collection of chapters—as in a (PDF) book—to a collection of chunks or modules—as in (HTML) Online Help. Throughout the project, we referred to the chunked documentation as Online Help, primarily because we used a Help Authoring Tool (HAT) to compile and publish our modules.

A HAT, with its tri-pane interface, is becoming an increasingly popular method for delivering modular documentation. However, Online Help is traditionally understood to be documentation, accessible from within an application, that helps users understand and perform the tasks they need to do while using that application. At a recent presentation of one of the leading HATs, the general assumption was that we were discussing Online Help that would be delivered as part of an application, accessible from the Help menu or by hitting F1.

Although we were not documenting an application, our group used the term Online Help whenever we needed to distinguish between information presented in chapters and information broken into modules. When the time came to add both formats to the CD and deliver it to our customers, we were faced with the moment of truth. Chapters, naturally,

were assembled in what is nominally known as a book. However, modules could not be described as Online Help because users would understandably misinterpret the term to mean information on using the CD.

In the end, we used the term Topics. But we continue—largely because of a lack of a viable alternative—to refer to the format as Online Help.

At this year's STC conference, I attended a session led by Neil Perlin. As his presentation concerned correct usage of Online Help terminology, I asked him what he calls Online Help when the nomenclature is inapplicable. He told me that this issue was raised some time ago and the term User Assistance was chosen. However, the technical communication community did not adopt the term with any enthusiasm.

Using the term Online Help to describe modular documentation accessible via a tri-pane interface is misleading. The misnomer is further compounded by the fact that both PDF books and HTML chunks are online and could both, arguably, be described as helping the user.

Modular documentation, as a more concise way of presenting information, may in fact become the dominant format within a very short time. In light of this probability, we need to find a term that accurately describes documentation delivery within the tri-pane interface. We also need a new name for the software used to compile the chunked modules (the HATs) that are not necessarily Online Help.

Is there a murmur of interest out there? Are heads bobbing in agreement? Or does my contention meet with indifference? We could continue to use the term Online Help to cover all online, tri-paned, modularized eventualities. Or we could put our heads together and immortalize a more precise—and accurate—expression.

Which is where I started. **1**