Adding Value through Glossaries

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Agenda

- The Value of Glossaries
- Deciding What to Define
- Definitions: Best Practices
- Analogies: Best Practices
- Conclusion and Discussion
The Value of Glossaries

Are glossaries really worth it?
Don’t users just search?

- **Search without existing knowledge fails:**
  “Search is certainly an efficient way to get to content. We search on the Web all the time. **But keyword searching is effective only if the item being sought is known in advance.** It assumes that people will be able to accurately and completely express their information needs as a query. However, this may not always be the case.”
  
  James Kalbach, *Designing Web Navigation*

- Therefore, glossaries can help users find information!
Glossaries support diverse audiences.

- Not all users have the same knowledge.
- Consider:
  - domain knowledge
  - product experience
  - general tech skills
  - language skills
Glossaries help users learn.

- A good glossary is a great for self-starters.
- It allows people to dabble when they want.
Glossaries showcase expertise.

- Your company seems knowledgeable.
- You can inspire user trust.
Remember: a definition has a limited role.

- It isn’t a dictionary definition.
- It isn’t meant to explain every detail (not a full description).
- It should help users understand enough to keep using the documentation.
- Think of a hook on which they can hang additional info.
Your definitions must be accessible.

- But what does that mean?
- First time?
  - no meaning in today’s world
  - based on dangerous assumptions
- Hypertext?
  - for online content only
  - useless if they print
  - takes users off-topic
- Glossary tab or chapter?
  - easy for us and for users
  - cost-effective
Exercise 1: Determine the Benefit

Would your product/company benefit from the added value of a glossary? Consider:

1. Do you have competitors in the field?
2. Is your product new (low version #)?
3. Is your company better known for something else?
4. Is the domain complex?
5. Do you serve a mixed audience?
What do you include?

What kinds of things should be in the glossary?
The experts are divided.

Document only your product

Document selected bits of the domain, as well
Product Terms

- **Products:**
  - different flavors
  - related products

- **Features:**
  - interface items (unique to your product)
  - concepts (what features do)
  - things that used to be called something else: for example, *slide builds* → *animations*
Workflow Concepts

- Task terms
- Actions (verbs with special use)
- Audience or user group names
Domain Concepts

- Technical terms
- Concepts
- Acronyms

Earth Science

### Content Words and phrases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Earth Science Concepts</th>
<th>Content Words and phrases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marine fossils</td>
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<td>Less dense</td>
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<td>Orbital velocity</td>
<td>water table</td>
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<td>Turbulent current</td>
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<td>supporting evidence</td>
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<td>Air-filled cavity</td>
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Exercise 2: Identify What to Define

For your product, list five things from each category:

- Product terms (features, unique interface items, etc.)
- Workflow concepts (task terms, audience terms, etc.)
- Technical domain concepts (terms, concepts, acronyms, etc.)
Definitions

Learn the best practices for effective definitions.
These are bad definitions!

**chair:** a thing you sit on.

**canonicalization**
In information technology, canonicalization is the process of making something canonical. To canonicalize is to ensure that data conforms to canonical rules. Canonicalization may sometimes mean generating canonical data from noncanonical data.
Definition Elements

- Classification
- Not too broad, too narrow, or self-referential
- Examples (the “aha!” factor)
  - a recognizable instance of the thing (such as MS Word as an example of a DTP tool)
  - a picture
Notice what’s missing?

- No phonetic guidelines
- No part of speech
- No usage examples (usually)
chair: a piece of furniture, with some form of back support, designed to accommodate one seated person.
molly
A type of bolt fastener (formerly trademarked name) used on drywall, designed to hold heavy objects, such as shelves. The molly has an expandable sleeve that fits into a drilled hole and acts as an anchor for the screw.
Exercise 3: Simple Definitions

Define one of the following things. Do not cheat and search online!

- self-winding watch
- single sourcing
- machine translation
- fuel injection
- driver (software)
- Eierkuchen
Did you remember…?

- self-winding watch: mechanical, mainspring gets wound as the person moves.
- single sourcing: information production (or development) concept of “write once, use many.” What example did you use?
- machine translation: did you qualify limitations?
- fuel injection: how does this differ from carburetors? Did you talk about fuel being atomized?
- driver: how did you classify? What is it for?
- Eierkuchen: mmmmmmm!!
Defining Acronyms

- Follow basic rules
- Include spell-out with term
- Remember, spell-out is not the definition!

Examples:
- DTP (desktop publishing): applications that…
- RSI (repetitive stress injuries): any type of injury that…
CSS (Cascading Style Sheets)
A coding language used to describe how a markup language document (for example, something written in HTML) is displayed. The CSS defines the layout of the document (fonts, paragraphs, colors, etc.). The CSS files are associated with the HTML document with a link tag:
<link rel="stylesheet" href=http://example.com/css/style.css type="text/css" />
Exercise 4: Acronyms

Define one of the following acronyms, initializations, or abbreviations. Do not cheat and search online!

- HAT
- PDF
- ATM
- API
- DLL
- RPM
- OOP
Did you remember…?

- Did you spell out the acronym?
- Did you remember to define it?
- Was there more than one solution? (Hint: context!)
- What do you do if the acronym is more commonly known than the spell-out? (Hint: personal computer)
Try one of these...
Analogies

Fix your user’s mental model!
What is an analogy?

- An explanatory trick to clarify complex, misunderstood concepts.
- Matches the way adults learn.
Best Practices

- Use a known concept of one thing to explain another thing:
  - known theory
  - common knowledge
  - an existing product or feature

- Choose something that your audience knows.

- Don’t confuse with metaphors or similes (do not use a simplistic “A is like B” structure!)
You can understand electricity by thinking about the way water behaves flowing through a system of pipes.

**Current** is a measure of the magnitude of the flow of electrons in a circuit. It is measured in Amperes, or Amps. Think of current as *how much water is flowing past a certain point*. Thus, the higher the amperage, the more electricity is flowing.

**Voltage** is a measure of the electrical energy of a circuit. It is measured in Volts. Think of voltage as *water pressure*. Think of a geyser as high voltage, and the shower of a low-rent apartment on the fifth floor of a tenement building as low voltage.

**Resistance** is a measure of a material’s ability to oppose the flow of electricity. It is measured in Ohms. A sponge in the pipe would act as a resistor, limiting the flow of water. Thus, the higher the resistance, the lower the voltage.
**IP address resolution:** To understand how data arrives to the correct computer on the Internet, consider air mail. Let’s say that you live in Dresden, Germany, and want to mail a letter to your friend in San Diego, USA. The post office in Dresden looks at the country and immediately routes the letter to the mail going to USA. There it is sorted to San Diego, California, then to the correct neighborhood and street, and the mail carrier delivers it to the right number and apartment. Similarly, data packets are routed to an IP address (such as 103.29.84.95) first by the large domain (103), then subnets (29), then the company network (84) and finally the specific computer (95).
Exercise 5: Analogies

Write an analogy.

- Think about some aspect of your product that your users consistently misunderstand.
- Or consider one of these:
  - how LIFO or FIFO works
  - what a compiler does
  - how a sandbox (anti-malware) works
Did you remember...?

- Did you first use a simple definition?
- Did you find a common-knowledge concept to map to?
- What happened when you tested it?
Conclusion and Discussion

- Glossaries can:
  - enrich your product documentation
  - help you support the needs of mixed audiences
  - position your company as experts in the domain

- Definitions:
  - provide a mental “hook” for your users
  - allow users to keep using the documentation

- Analogies:
  - help your users develop a correct mental model
  - make complex information more accessible
Thank you!

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A butter approach to TC…