

What is Content Optimization?

by Val Swisher



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What is Content Optimization?

Content optimization is a big topic and one that is not simple to define. In this eBook, I demystify content optimization and show you how you can make your content:

- ✓ Easier to read and comprehend in all languages
- ✓ More efficient and less expensive to create, translate, locate, and manage

Optimizing content allows you to deliver the **right content** to the **right people** on the **right device** in the **right language**.



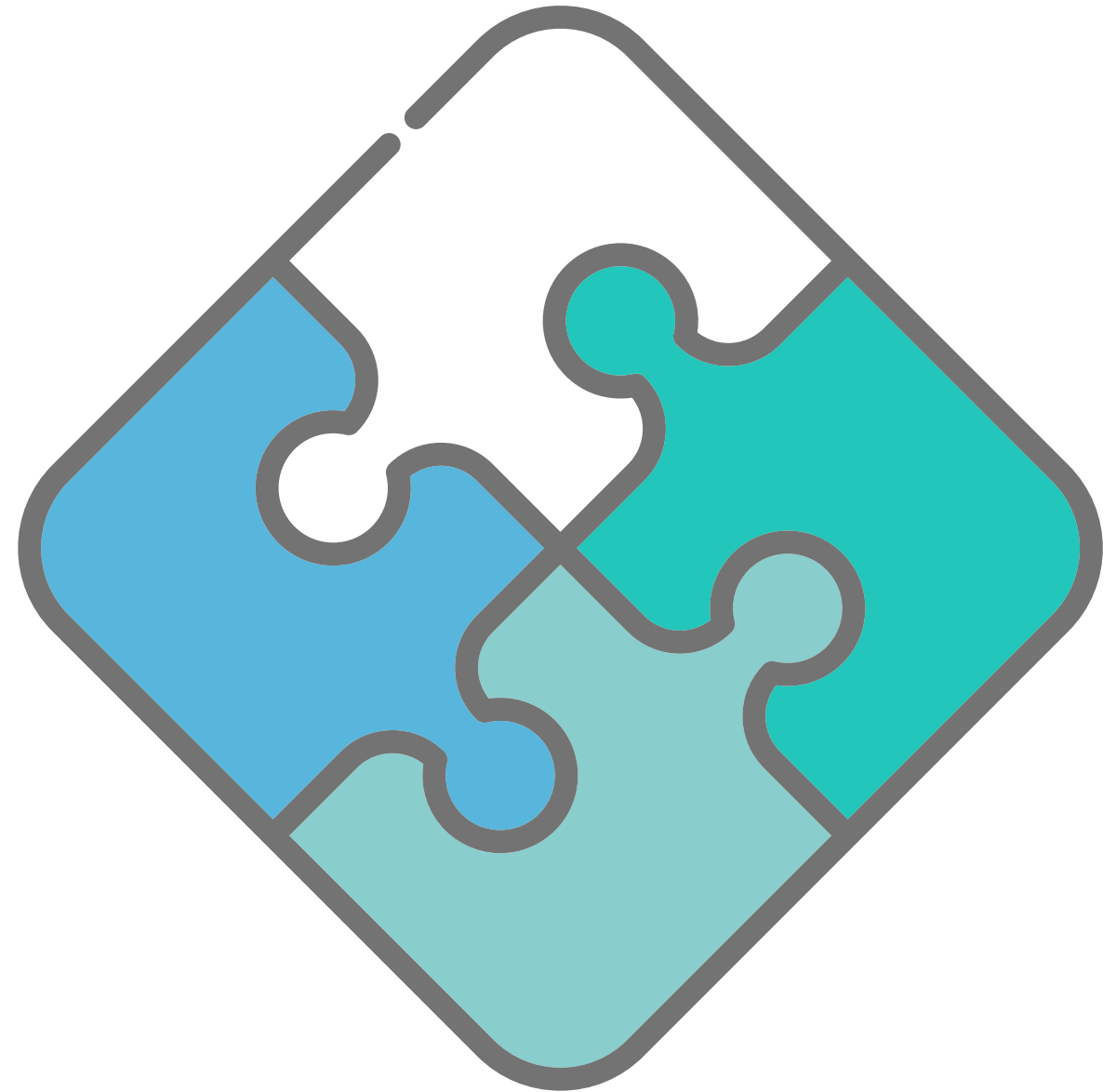
Definition

Let's start by defining optimization. According to Merriam-Webster:

op·ti·mi·za·tion noun

“an act, process, or methodology of making something (as a design, system, or decision) as fully perfect, functional, or effective as possible;”

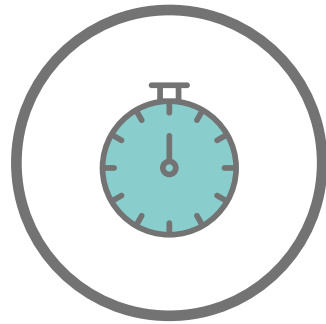
To understand content optimization, we need to consider content as a system, rather than a document or a bunch of words on a page. Content as a system has interconnected pieces and parts. It is an organized collection of files. This is not to say that you can't optimize a single document. You can. But the value of content optimization as a discipline lies in how it applies to a system of files.



Purpose

There are many reasons to optimize your content. Here are a few:

Content Optimization



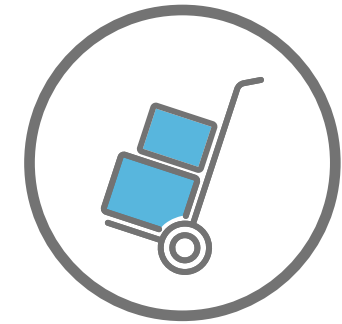
Makes the creation of content as streamlined and efficient as possible.



Makes the translation of content more accurate, faster, and less expensive.



Makes content easy to locate, easy to read, and easy to understand.



Enables us to deliver the right content to the right people on the right device in the right language.

That's a tall order, isn't it? The good news is that, today, we have all the tools we need to optimize content in a multitude of ways.

Without tools, optimizing content would be an arduous – if not impossible – task.

Elements of Content Optimization

There are several elements that work in harmony to truly optimize content:

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Structure

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Reuse

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Separating text from format

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Terminology management

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Translation memory



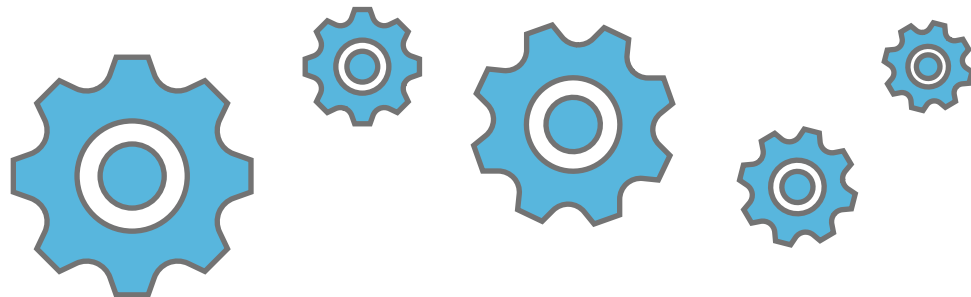
Elements of Content Optimization: Structure

One of the basic ways to optimize content is to employ a structure.

There are many definitions of structure. Merriam-Webster, alone, has multiple definitions. My favorite is:

“something that is built by putting parts together and that usually stands on its own.”

I like this definition because it covers two aspects of structured writing. The first is that we build larger information products by putting smaller pieces of content together. In addition, each smaller piece of content should stand on its own, without the need for other content before or after it.



What is Structured Content?

In her book, “Managing Enterprise Content: A Unified Content Strategy,” Ann Rockley defines structured content as follows:

“Structure is a hierarchical order in which content occurs in an information product (for example, web page, brochure, or article) or component...Structure frees you to think about the content, not how content should be organized and written because that’s already done for you - in templates and guidelines that authors have used for years.”

Elements of Content Optimization: Structure

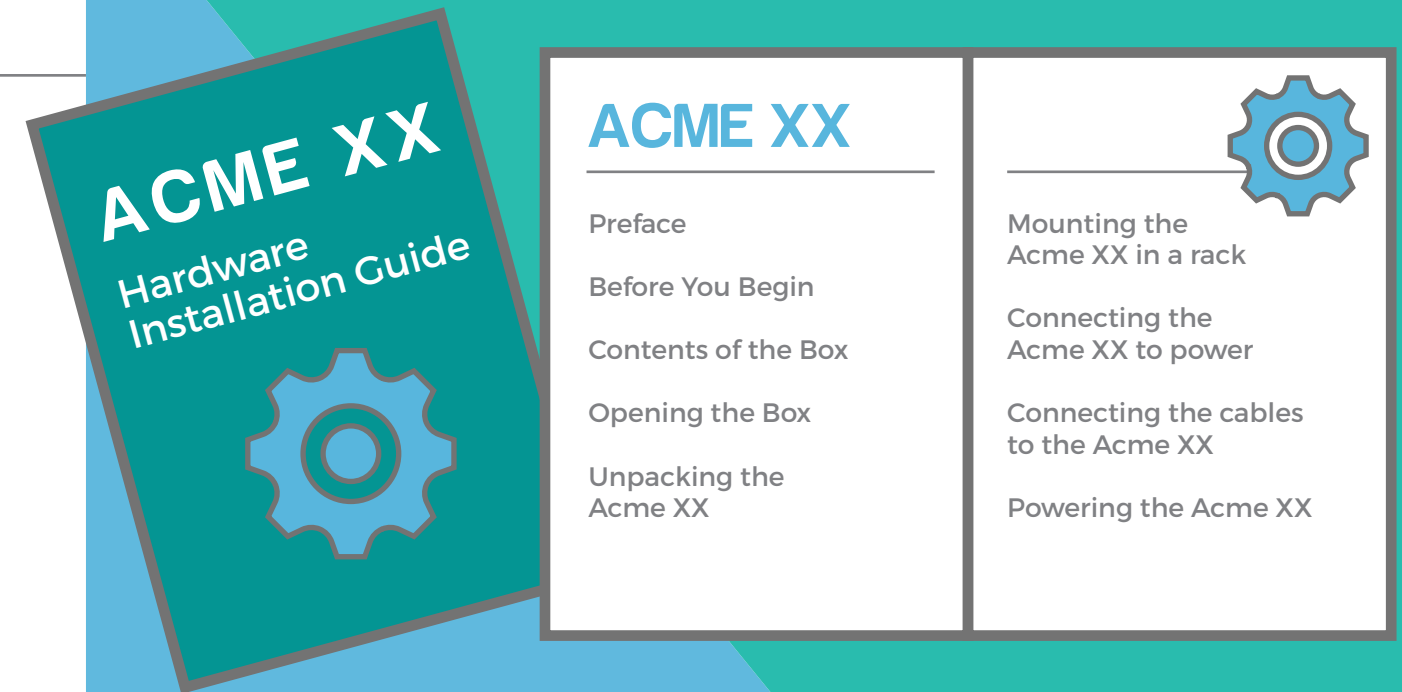
What is Structured Content?

One of the simplest ways to structure content is to create a standard model or template. Here is an example.

Suppose we work for Acme Corporation. At Acme, we make a variety of widgets. There are different types of widgets, large and small. All widgets have at least one thing in common – they are all pieces of hardware and need to be installed. The installation information is detailed in the hardware installation guide for each widget.

Without structure, each hardware installation guide could be unique. It could have different sections, written and ordered in different ways. Creating installation guides this way would be terribly inefficient for the writers and difficult to navigate for the readers. Each hardware installation guide would be considered a “one-off,” and there would be no consistency.

Instead, we could create a structure for any hardware installation guide. The structure includes sections for all the information you need to install the widget, regardless of widget model or type. To your right is an example for a hardware installation guide and so on.



We could use this structure for any hardware installation guide that we need to create for any product in the Acme product line.

There are many examples of structure. We see them every day. Recipes have a structure. Knitting patterns have a structure. There can be differences in the structure of a recipe or pattern. However, treating a cookbook or a pattern book as a content system, we expect that each recipe (or pattern) within that book has the same structure. If we change the structure within the system, it becomes difficult for the reader to follow from recipe to recipe or pattern to pattern.

Structure sets up an expectation of how content is organized.

Elements of Content Optimization: Structure

Why is Structure a Component of Content Optimization?

Structure is one of the most basic components of content optimization. Here's why:



Structure makes it easy to write content.

Because it sets up a model, writers know what information is supposed to go in each section. When I know what information I need to create and I know where that information belongs, it is faster and easier for me to write the content.



Structure makes it easy to find content.

From the reader's standpoint, structure sets an expectation of where I can find content. For example, if all hardware installation guides start with a section about contents of the box, then I know exactly where to go and what to look for if I need to locate the contents for any product I have purchased.



Structure makes content more nimble.

By using a structure, my content is more concise. I only write about the things that are part of the model. If the model is created properly, it includes all the required information and only the required information. The more concise my content is, the easier it is to write, locate, understand, and translate.



Structure makes it easy to store content.

Structured content is more organized. Better-organized content is easier to store and retrieve. Content management systems rely on a well-organized system for storing content and its associated metadata. A well-organized system for storing content translates into a well-organized system for finding content, too. The faster I can find content, the more efficient I can be.

Elements of Content Optimization: Reuse

Reusing content is another important part of content optimization.

Reuse is a simple concept. **Rather than write the same thing over and over again, write information once, store it once, and reuse it every place that you need it.**

It seems too simple and straight-forward. Yet, content reuse is not nearly as common as it should or could be. There are various reasons that content is not reused:

- The content is not structured, so extricating the part I need to reuse is difficult or impossible.
- Someone else wrote what I need, but I don't know that it exists.
- I (or someone else) wrote it once upon a time, but I cannot find it again to reuse it.
- Someone else wrote what I need, but I think my version needs to be tweaked just a teeny tiny bit for one reason or another.

The benefits of content reuse far outweigh the time and money it takes to set it up properly. **To reuse content successfully:**

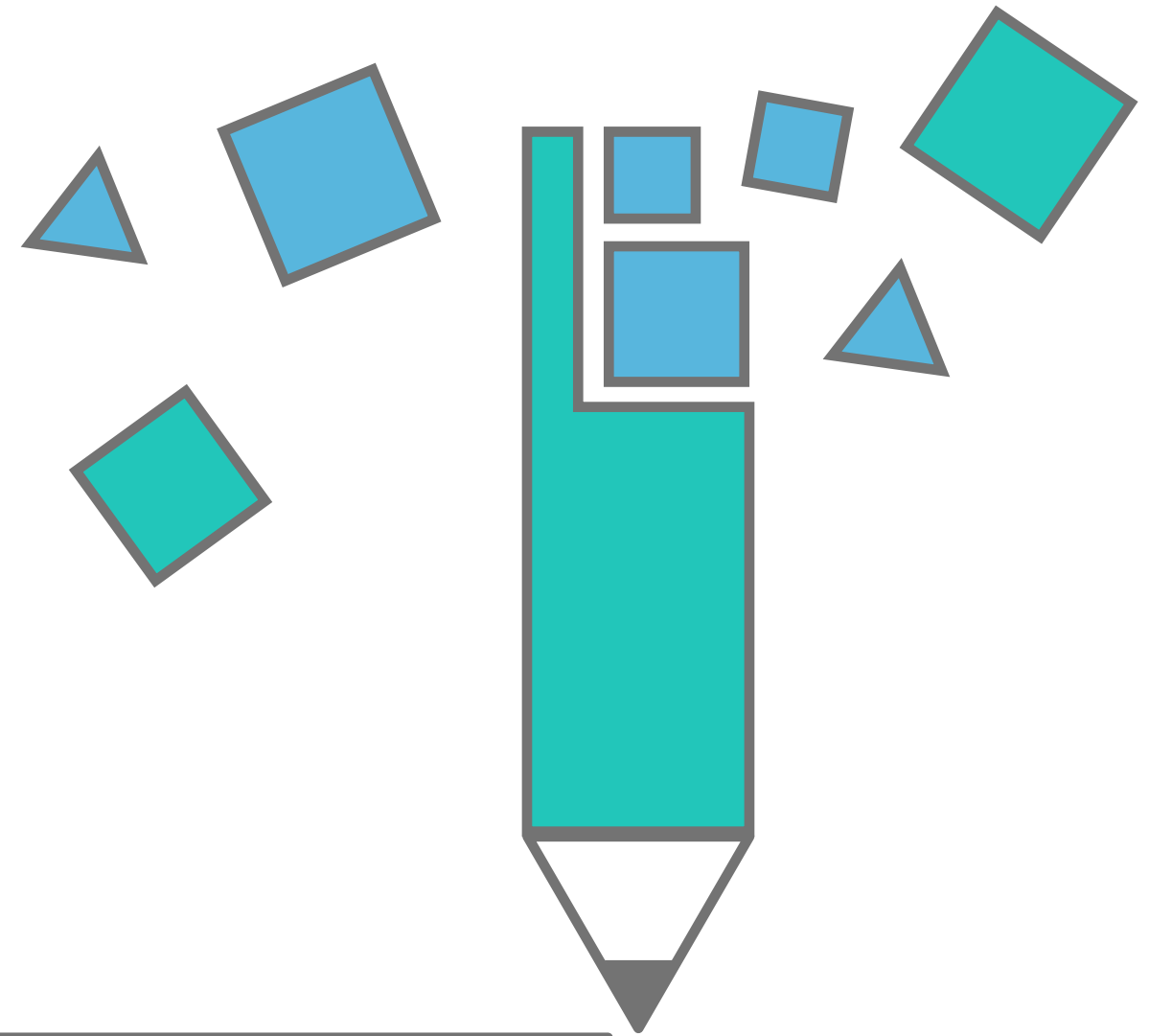
- ✓ Break the content into small, reusable chunks.
- ✓ Make it easy for me to locate content that exists.
- ✓ Train me to look for content before I start writing.
- ✓ Convince me that my teeny tiny change is not important enough to rewrite the chunk.
- ✓ Provide a different place in the structure for me to add my new or changed information.
- ✓ Provide a robust way to manage terminology so that chunks of content can be used together without confusing the reader.



Elements of Content Optimization: Reuse

Reuse and Structure

As you can see, structure is an inherent prerequisite to reuse. It is almost impossible to reuse content that exists in a monolithic block. It is much easier to reuse content that stands on its own (just like the definition of structure). If I create smaller chunks of content that each stand on their own, then I can incorporate one or more pre-existing chunks into my new information product. Of course, to do this effectively, I need to work in an environment that supports the building of information products from smaller chunks. XML provides this environment, which is one of the reasons why more and more companies are moving to an XML-based authoring solution.



Elements of Content Optimization: Reuse

Why is Reuse a Component of Content Optimization?

Like structure, reuse is a basic component of content optimization. Here's why:



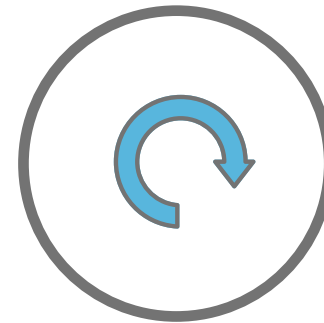
Reuse makes it faster to create information products.

By reusing existing content, I do not need to spend as much time writing. I only need to write new and different information. I can then build and publish an information product that is made up of several chunks.



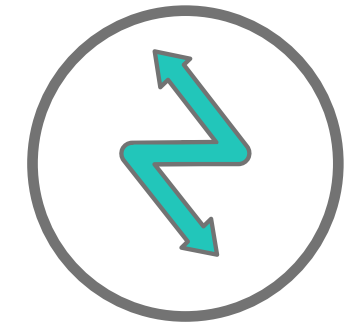
Reuse makes content more consistent.

When I reuse content in information products, those products are more consistent. Consistent content is easier for readers to locate and understand.



Reuse makes content updates quick and easy.

Rather than having to update the same content in many places, I only have to update content once. Because the content is reused, that change is propagated to every information product.



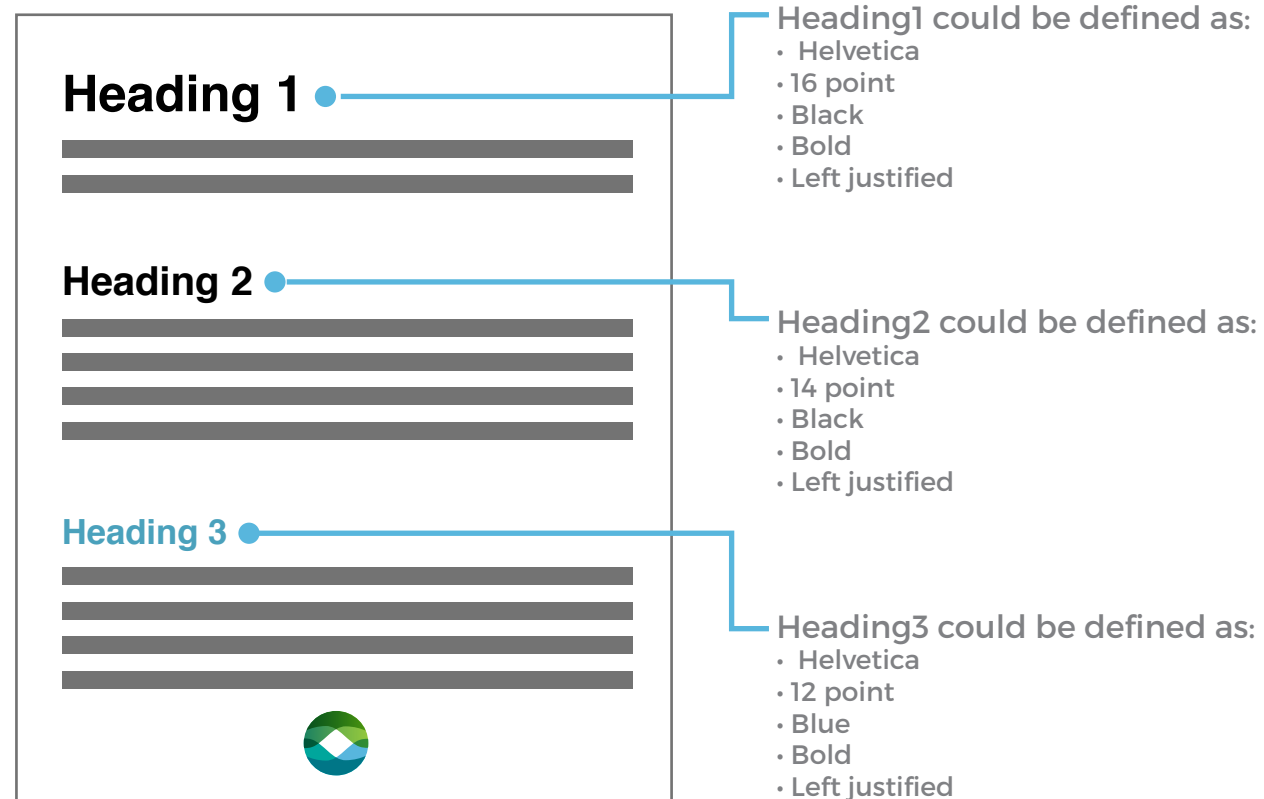
Reuse makes translation cheaper and faster.

Once I translate a piece of content, I can reuse the translation in the same way I reuse the original source. I only send new and changed content to be translated. Reusing translations speeds up the translation and saves money.



Elements of Content Optimization: Separating Text and Format

There was a time when I needed to format the content while I created it. And, to a large extent, much of the content we create today is still created this way. For example, when I create a document using MS Word, I apply styles to it. I apply Heading1 to my first-level headings. I apply Heading2 to my second-level heads, and so on. **Often, the styles are predefined in my MS Word template.**



Sometimes, I don't even use templates. If I want a line of text to be Helvetica, 16-point, bold, left justified, I write the text, highlight it, and format it to those specifications.

When I write and format content simultaneously, I am limited in how I can use the content. Formatting as I write locks me into using the content, with its pre-defined formats, in a pre-defined way. Everything from the layout of the page to the format of each character is static.

For example, if I use the MS Word styles defined to the left, the content tagged with Heading1 will always be Helvetica 16, black, bold, left justified. While this style looks fine on my big computer monitor, it does not look good on my smartphone. The font is too large and it takes up way too much space on the small screen.

For me to publish the same content to my phone, I need to create, manage, store, and update an entirely separate version of the content. The smartphone version needs to have the styles defined differently for the significantly smaller screen.

Elements of Content Optimization: Separating Text and Format

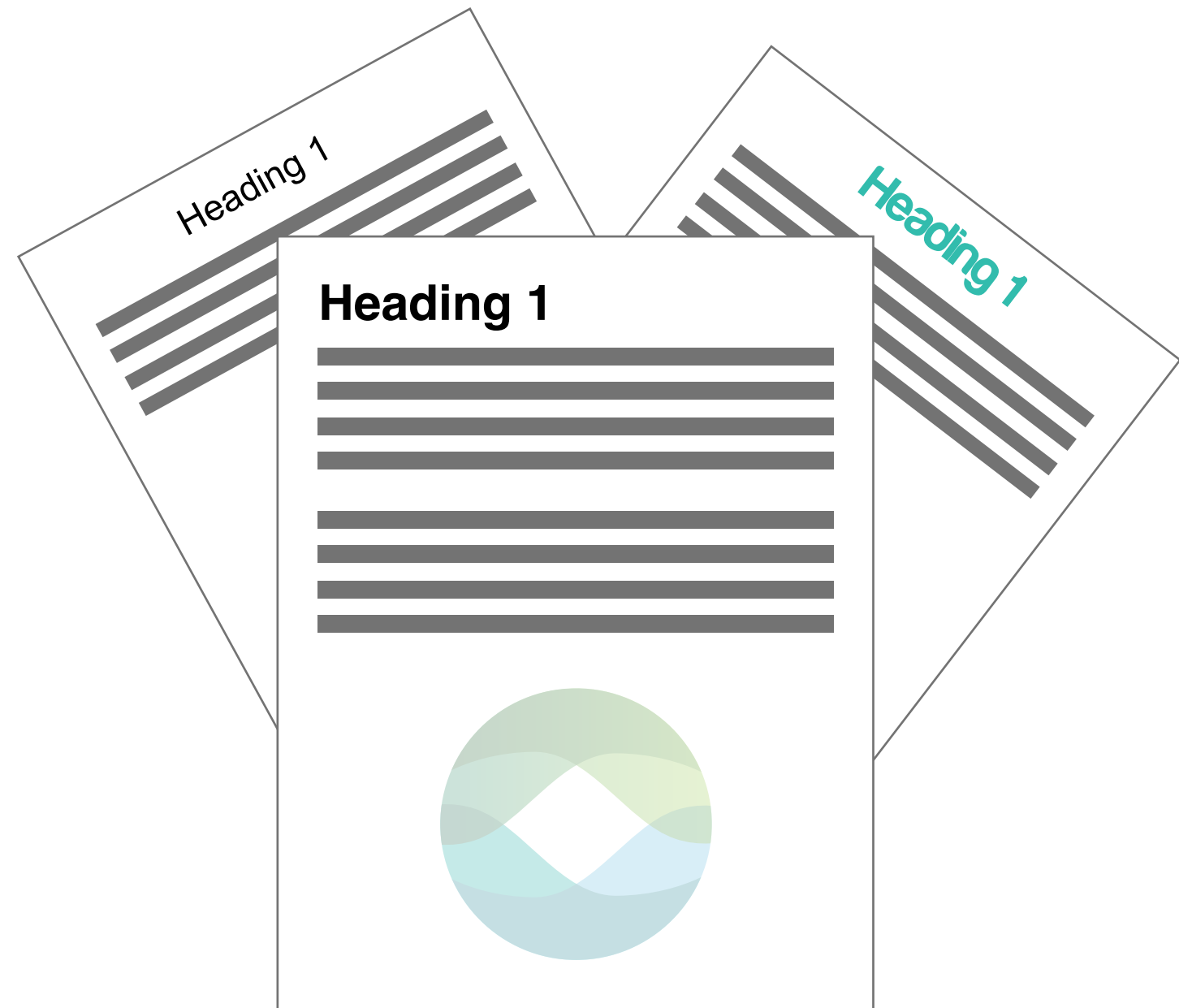
An Optimized Way to Format Content

By separating the text from the format, I can write the content once and display it in various ways. Here's how it's done:

- Write content and apply style tags to it.
 - The tags could be named Heading1, Heading2, and so on.
 - Or, they could use a different naming scheme.
- Create a separate document that defines each tag.
 - This document (often called a style sheet) is separate from the content itself.
 - I can create multiple style sheets that have different definitions for the same tag.

For example, in one case, I define Heading1 as Helvetica, 16-point, bold, left justified. In another case, I define Heading1 as Arial, 12-point, centered. I can have as many style sheets, with different definitions for the tags as I need.

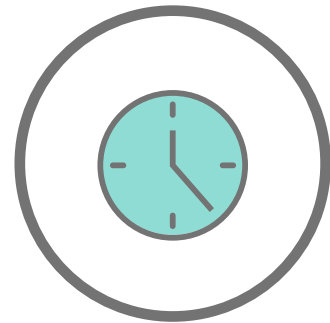
- Before you publish the information product, marry the content to whichever style sheet you need.
- If you need to produce multiple information products, use the same content with multiple style sheets.



Elements of Content Optimization: Separating Text and Format

Why is Separating Text and Format a Component of Content Optimization?

There are many reasons why content optimization includes separating text and format:



Separating text and format saves time.

Creating different versions of content for different layouts is a time-consuming process.



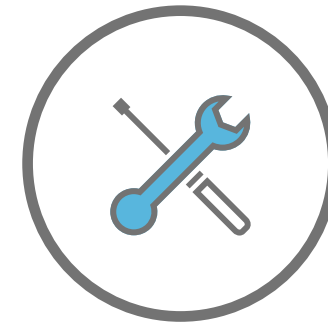
Separating text and format is flexible.

I can publish the same content to different types of devices (multi-channel publishing). Rather than creating a unique version of content for a computer, a tablet, and a smartphone, I create the text one time. I then publish it to as many channels as I need.



Separating text and format is easier to manage.

Rather than having to store many versions of the same content (one for each format), I create and store the content once.



Separating text and format is quicker and easier to update.

If I need to change or update to the content, I change one file, rather than multiple files.



Separating text and format makes translated content easier to manage.

Take all the reasons to separate text and format in one language and then multiply the time, savings, and flexibility by the number of languages you use.

Elements of Content Optimization: Terminology Management

Enforcing consistent terminology increases the efficiency of everyone in your organization who creates, works with, and reads content. That encompasses just about everyone.

Using consistent terminology does not come naturally to most of us. Consistency is not the way we were taught to write when we were children. Back in fourth grade, writing teachers instructed us to vary our language and to use different words to say the same thing. We were taught that using lots of different (usually multisyllabic) words makes our content more colorful and less repetitive.

Unfortunately, it also makes our content woefully inefficient to write, reuse, manage, and translate.

Terminology and Reuse

Just like reuse relies on structure, reuse and terminology go hand-in-hand. If writers do not use the same words to describe the same things, piecing together smaller, reusable chunks of content yields an information product that is inconsistent and may not make sense.

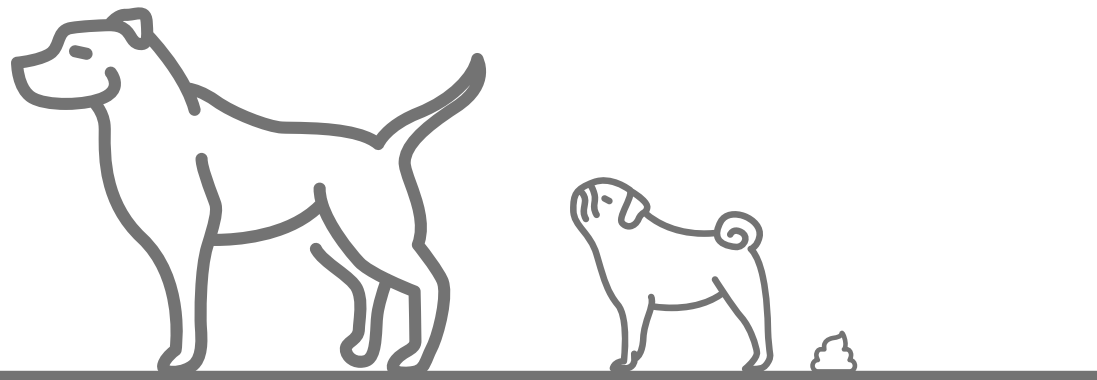
For example, let's say we are creating an information product about dog care. We have four writers, each working on a separate chunk. We plan on pulling all four chunks together to publish the final information product. If we do not manage the terminology, we could end up with:

- ✓ How to Groom the Dog
- ✓ How to Greet the Puppy
- ✓ How to Feed the Canine
- ✓ How to Train the Mut

Elements of Content Optimization: Terminology Management

Because we didn't manage terminology, when we publish the final information product, it looks disjointed. It is confusing for readers. They aren't sure if training a mutt is different from training a puppy or a dog.

For chunks to be reused without causing confusion, the words in the chunks need to be consistent. If your content is more complicated than dog care, it is even more important to use consistent terminology.



Managing Terminology the Old Fashioned Way

In addition to term reuse, content optimization addresses how we manage terminology as a whole. If we treat content as a system, terminology needs to be managed as a system, as well.

Unfortunately, most companies use inefficient and arcane methods to manage terminology, if they manage it at all. The most common tool used to manage terminology in the content creation world is an Excel spreadsheet or a Word table.

Because we use outdated and inefficient tools, the process of adding words to the term list is completely manual. The process of verifying words against the term list is also manual. This makes the task of writing content using the correct terminology extremely cumbersome.

Elements of Content Optimization: Terminology Management

To illustrate, the most common workflow for verifying terminology goes something like this:

- I write my content.
- At some point during the writing or editing process, I look at one of my terms and I think,

“Gosh, I wonder if I should be using dog instead of puppy?
Or is it canine? Maybe it’s just puppy?”

- I stop what I’m doing and get the term list. This task is easy if I know where to find the list. On the other hand, finding the list might be a needle in my corporate intranet haystack.
- I look up the word. Is it listed under puppy? Canine? Dog? I search for it.
- I find it and see that I’m using/not using the correct word. If necessary, I go back to my document and replace the word.
- Or, I don’t find it in the list of terms, so I figure it is a term I don’t have to care about and I just wasted all that valuable time.

Manually looking up terms is inefficient. I must stop my writing to try to remember if I just wrote a word that my company cares about. Then I must look it up manually in a list where I don’t know if I will find it or not. Finally, I might have to act on that information, or maybe not.

Optimizing Terminology Management

To optimize how you manage terminology, you need a tool that goes beyond a list or table of words. The ideal tool should do these things:

- Store all the managed terms in a database.
- Link the approved term to all the disallowed terms.
- Automatically check the content and compare every word to the terminology database.
- Flag every term that is used incorrectly.
- Suggest the term that should be used in its place.

Optimizing terminology management makes it much easier and more efficient to optimize the content you create.

Elements of Content Optimization: Terminology Management

Why is Terminology Management a Component of Content Optimization?

Terminology management is an important, but often overlooked, component of content optimization. Here's why:



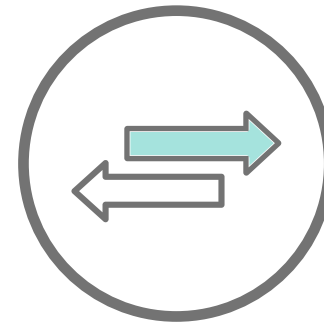
Managing terminology makes it more efficient to create content.

If you pick one term and stick to it, you spend less time coming up with new and different words for the same thing.



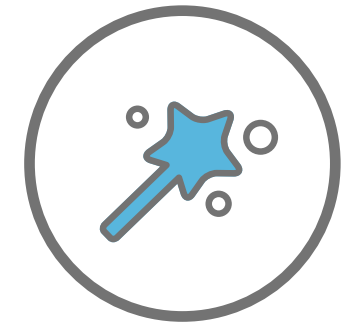
Managing terminology makes it easier for readers to understand.

By using the same words over and over, readers spend less time figuring out the differences between your words and more time understanding what you are telling them.



Managing terminology allows you to reuse content from different sources.

If everything we write uses the consistent terms, we can mix and match chunks written by different authors without worrying about a mismatch of words. Information products are more unified, easier to read, and easier to comprehend.



Managing terminology makes translation cheaper, faster, and better.

If we stick to one English term, we get the same translation each time. If the sentence has already been translated and I have not changed any words, the cost of translation drops dramatically.



Elements of Content Optimization: Translation Memory



Over the past ten years or so, translation tools have come a long way. **When used properly, these tools make the process of translating content much cheaper and faster, and the resulting translation is of much higher quality.**

One of the translation tools that optimizes content is translation memory (TM). Translation memory is a database that stores translation units. A translation unit is a pair of words or phrases. One member of the pair is the source language and the other is the target language. Every time content is translated, each translation unit is stored in the TM for future use.

The next time the translation tool encounters the same content, the tool automatically substitutes the already-translated pair in the translation. The translator doesn't have to retranslate something that has already been translated.

Elements of Content Optimization: Translation Memory

Translation Memory and Terminology Management

Optimizing translation is tied closely to managing terminology. For translation memory to be most effective, you must say the same thing, the same way, every time you say it. If you use a different word or phrase to describe the same thing, that new word or phrase will not be in the TM and will need to be translated. If you are not consistent in your source terminology, the translation process is more time-consuming, more expensive, and more error-prone.

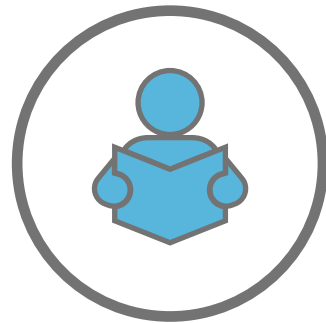
To optimize your content most effectively, align the terms in your TM with the terms in your terminology management system. Sometimes, we call this alignment **round-tripping terminology**. When we round-trip terminology, the terms in the TM match the terms in the terminology management system. When one changes, the other is updated. Keeping the two systems synchronized is an important aspect of content optimization for translated content.



Elements of Content Optimization: Translation Memory

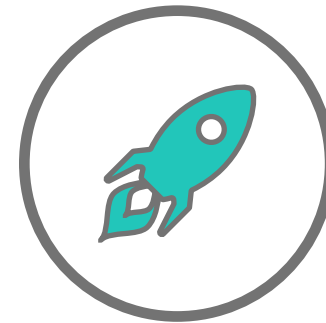
Why is Translation Memory a Component of Content Optimization?

Using translation memory and aligning it to terminology management are the final components of content optimization. Here's why:



Using translation memory improves readability.

Using the same translations makes it easier to comprehend the content in every language. It is easier for the reader to process the content, because the same words have been used before.



Using translation memory speeds time-to-market.

If we reuse translations, it takes less time to translate content because there is less content to translate. In addition, translation reviewers have less to review.



Using translation memory saves money.

Once content is translated, the cost of translation drops precipitously. In fact, if the sentences before and after the already-translated content are the same (known as a context match), you don't have to pay anything at all.



Where the Rubber Meets the Optimized Road

It's probably pretty clear that to completely optimize your content process takes a great deal of coordination, upfront investment, and change. If your organization is like most, making these types of changes can be daunting.

Here are some tips on how to start the wheels of change.



Getting Started

Coordinate and Cooperate

You've heard it time and again.

“Break down the silos.”

And, yes, I'm here to say it to you again. Silos in content organizations are at the very root of unoptimized content. Writers need to communicate. Departments need to coordinate. For example, you want to make sure the source terminology and the translation in the TM match. To do this, the people creating the content and the people translating the content need to communicate. Frequently. Very frequently.

It's not that difficult to start breaking down silos. Pizza in a conference room during lunch is a great place to start. I know, that sounds corny. But, it works. If you can provide a forum for people to meet and chat, you will see more cooperation. Free lunch doesn't hurt, either.

Create Structure Using Existing Tools

I'm all for having the most intelligent and helpful tools available. However, sometimes there is no budget for purchasing new tools. You can use your existing tools and start to move towards structure today.

Evaluate some of your content. Do you have content that is similar? Can you create a recipe for each type of information product that you create? You don't need a fancy tool to create a way to organize all hardware installation guides. You don't need new software to determine the structure of a case study or a data sheet. You do need some time to figure out the best structure. Then you need buy-in from management and your writing team to move to the new structure.

Later, when it is time to replace your authoring tool, you'll be happy you did the structure work upfront. Learning a new tool can be enough of a challenge. If you change the way you write first, then you'll only need to learn the new tool. The structure will already be in place.

Getting Started

Have a Style Guide and a Term List

I believe that manual style guides and term lists are cumbersome. I think they need to be automated to be truly valuable. However, you need to start by creating a style guide and gathering your terminology. With or without a tool, you need to go through the process of defining corporate style and terminology.

Without a tool, it is very difficult to enforce corporate style and terminology. But you need to try. Another round of pizza might be the ticket to introducing your writers to corporate style. You've got to start someplace.

Prepare for the Long Haul

Optimizing your content workflow is not something that can be done overnight. It usually takes years to put all the pieces in place. Be patient. Prepare to buy a lot of pizza.

Make the Investment

There comes a point in the growth of every organization than an investment in tools needs to be made. It is difficult, if not impossible, to optimize your content and your workflow without tools made for the job. There are dozens of content management systems on the market. The same is true with authoring tools. It's going to take some time to figure out which one(s) are right for your content needs.

Of course, it's also going to take some time to convince management why you need the tools. So, start putting together your numbers – because it is all about numbers. One place to start is writing and editing efficiencies. How much time do you currently spend rewriting the same information over and over again? How much does that cost the company? How much time do you spend searching the corporate intranet for information that you know exists, but cannot find?

One big area to explore is the cost of translation. How much do you currently spend on translation? How much would you save if you used structured authoring? Terminology management? Linking translation memories and terminology?

So, What is Content Optimization and Why Do You Care?

Content optimization is a practice that makes content:

- ✓ Easier to read and comprehend in all languages
- ✓ More efficient and less expensive to create, locate, translate, and manage

Content optimization allows us to deliver the right content to the right people on the right devices in the right language.

The components of content optimization include:

- ✓ Structure
- ✓ Reuse
- ✓ Separating text and format
- ✓ Terminology management
- ✓ Translation memory

Content optimization is not a simple task. It requires an investment of time and resources. Companies that invest in content optimization experience significant efficiency gains in the writing process, the editing process, and the translation process. These companies:

- ✓ **Spend less time writing.**
- ✓ **Create better quality content in all languages.**
- ✓ **Spend less money.**
- ✓ **Get content to market faster.**
- ✓ **Field fewer technical support calls.**
- ✓ **Have happier customers.**



What We Do

At Content Rules, we combine strategy, optimization, and development to maximize the effectiveness of your content and meet your business needs.

We have more than two decades of experience. We pride ourselves on delivering complete, high-quality content services, on time and on budget.

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your needs	Content Strategy	Global Content Strategy	Content Development	Content Optimization
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We Don't Have Enough People.	✓		✓	
Our English Content is Not Right.	✓			✓
Our English Content is Not Working.		✓	✓	✓
We Spend Too Much Time on Content.	✓			✓
Our Content is Inconsistent.	✓		✓	✓
We Need to Translate, but Don't Know Where to Begin.		✓		
Our Translations Cost Too Much.		✓		✓
Our Translations Aren't Working.		✓		✓





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