"Sorry, No Help Available"
Providing an Integrated User Guide and Help System

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Abstract

Good on-line help facilities and a comprehensive user guide benefit even the most user-friendly applications. However these are often given low priority or even left out due to the work involved. This paper presents a system whereby the effort of preparing both user guide and help screens is replaced by an integrated system, using an electronic version of the user guide to automatically generate the help screens.

Why is help often poor?

Every time a user receives a “Sorry, no help available” message, or is given inaccurate or insufficient information from help screens, their confidence in the help system, and in the application as a whole, is reduced.

Insufficient or inaccurate help can be as bad as none at all

Common reasons for poor help include:
- Low priority within projects
- Underestimating the work required to write useful help text
- Lack of user involvement
- Inconsistency in the level of help offered
- Lack of navigational aids
- Poor layout

By combining the ease of development of a user guide with the ease of access and distribution of a help system, the system presented in this paper helps to overcome many of the pitfalls encountered in writing help screens.

What are the attributes of a good help system?

In order to achieve its purpose, a help system should provide:
- Easy access to relevant information via
  - Context sensitivity
  - Links between related topics
  - A variety of navigational aids
- Completeness
- Relevance
- Accuracy

A help system should provide easy access to the information users require to use the application

All these attributes can be addressed more easily if the help system can be integrated with the user guide development, avoiding duplication of effort and aiding consistency.

What are the benefits of an integrated user guide and help system?

Integrating the development of the user guide and help screen will provide:
- Benefits to users
  - On-line access to user guide
  - A variety of ways to access the required information
  - Consistency between user guide and help
  - Involved in the development process
  - Less reliance on support services
- Benefits to management
  - Reduced development costs
  - Reduced user costs
  - Reduced support costs
- Benefits to developers
  - Ease of development and maintenance
  - Easier to proof
  - Reduced workload
  - Improved user buy-in
- Benefits to the environment
  - Saves paper!
The USERHELP System

Our first implementation of these ideas was for a client of ours - Goodyear Franchise Management in Germany - who requested that the text for their help screens should be entered and maintained by the users. This gave rise to the idea that the user guide and help screens could be sourced from one document.

The USERHELP system consists of three parts:

• A user guide.
  The user guide is created using a word processor with markers to indicate the page links and glossary items for the help system. Some restrictions are placed on the layout of the text in order to enable the conversion to help files.

• A method to convert user guide to help files.
  The text from the user guide is exported as an ASCII file, which is then imported to a SAS® data set. All links are validated (parent-child relationships) and an automatic table of contents is created.

• The Help application.
  The help application is based on the Microsoft® Windows™ Help system WINHELP. It displays help files and provides various navigation options detailed below.

The help system provides context sensitive links into the parent application. Each part of the parent application has its own uniquely named help page, eg help for PRIMARY.FRAME is the help page called PRIMARY (see Figure 1).

When implementing the USERHELP application, we found that the requirements of an on-line help system were different to those of a normal user guide, and this influenced our approach to writing both the help system and the user guide.

Designing a help system for a user guide

In the on-line help system:

• ‘Pages’ from the user guide are displayed as help screens.

• Hypertext ‘Links’ between related topics are identified by square brackets in the user guide - clicking on a link takes the user to the relevant page.

• A Glossary facility was provided to allow the users to define commonly used terms. Glossary items appear in a pop-up window when clicked.

• Other navigational tools such as History and Search were provided to help the user find the relevant information.

Designing a user guide for help screens

As well as designing a useful help system, it is important not to overlook the text that is being displayed. We considered the following when writing the user guide to be used with the USERHELP system:

Content

• Content should be developed, where possible, in conjunction with (or even by) the users.

• Key information should be presented at-a-glance on the first page.

• Provide links to:
  – Secondary options
  – Related topics.

Layout

• Consistent layout aids familiarity and understanding.

• Avoid dense text (less than 40% is ideal).

• Use links to avoid repetition.

• Use glossary for common terms.

• Pictures are not converted.
User levels
It is important to recognise that different users operate at different levels. What may be 'easy' for some can be incomprehensible for others. Recognising this can help provide the appropriate level of information.

- New users
  - Introduction and overview of options
  - Tips on usage
  - How to use help
- Experienced users
  - Details of functionality/changes
  - Related topics, index, search
- Power users
  - Help is for wimps!

USERHELP: Features

The USERHELP application contains a variety of navigation features described below.

- Scrollable text allows long pages in the user guide to be viewed via a scrollbar. The scrollbar hides when it is not needed. We nick-named this the 'shy' scrollbar!
- Next/Previous page allows users to scroll through pages in the same order as presented in the user guide.
- Hypertext links provide links to related topics. These are highlighted in blue. Clicking on the link takes the user to the relevant page.
- Glossary items are shown in green and appear in a pop-up window when clicked.
- A contents page is automatically generated from the first line of each page in the user guide. See figure 2.
- History allows the user to see which pages have been viewed, and optionally return to them. The Back button returns to the last page displayed.
- Search allows the user to search for any text in the user guide and select any page containing that text.
- Print prints the current page.
- Copy to clipboard sends the current page to the clipboard (or equivalent for non-Windows systems).
- Annotate allows the user to add their own comments to any page. This is currently experimental.
- Bookmark allows the user to mark particular pages for future reference. This is currently experimental.

Installation options

When the system is installed, the developer can select from certain installation or site specific options.

- Default page can be set.
- Context-sensitivity can be achieved by links with the programs in the parent application. e.g. help for PRIMARY.FRAME is the help page called PRIMARY.
- Colours can be customised.
- Any function can be set to pull-down menu, command or function key.
- Support for OEM characters (Windows only) allows extended characters such as bullets to be displayed.

Requirements

The USERHELP application requires:

- Base SAS 6.08 or higher on any platform.
- SAS/AF® required for tailoring.
- Word processor to create User Guide:
  - Must be able to export ASCII text,
  - Some restrictions on layout.
- An application to provide help for!
- Your own help text.
Conclusion

The development of the USERHELP application has enabled users to provide an on-line user guide which is comprehensive, feature-packed, and above all useful. In developing the application, our conclusions are:

• Provide an integrated system,
• Involve the users,
• Don't underestimate the effort.

We are considering making the USERHELP application more widely available. If you are interested, please contact the author at the address below and mark all requests USERHELP.

Credits

Many thanks to Goodyear Franchise Management in Cologne, Germany, for whom we developed the original application.

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