

Context for InDesign Online Help

Background

While earning a Master's in Professional and Technical Writing, I took many courses to prepare for a professional and technical writing career. One course was Software Documentation, which consisted of five students. With the professor, we collaboratively developed online help Adobe InDesign help system (online help).

Accessing the Online Help

The online help was uploaded to the university's website but is no longer maintained. However, you can click on the first image/sample in the Samples section to download the file.



Note: The 8896358 Microsoft security update may prevent you from opening CHM files downloaded from the Internet, even if saved to your local hard disk. To resolve this problem, clear the **Always ask before opening this file** check box in the Open File-Security Warning dialog box, and click **Open**. If you click **Open** without clearing the checkbox, the help file's table of contents will appear, but the body text will not.

- **Audience:** Undergraduate and graduate students, full-time faculty, teaching assistants, and adjuncts at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR).
- **Percentage of I wrote:** I was primarily responsible for the Text section and wrote about 80% of the Text section.
- **Original content or revised content:** The Text section is my original writing.
- **Resources for drafting content:** I used online information, Adobe's help, and my user experience with InDesign as resources for content.

- **Content editing:** I edited my section and classmates reviewed my section in another round of edits. The online help underwent heavy editing.
- **Style guide usage:** A company style guide was not used to write this document. We created a stylesheet in RoboHelp to ensure consistent formatting throughout the help system. We used a style sheet to ensure consistent writing practices.
- **Additional useful context, such as deadlines, achievements, etc.:** The goal was to learn how to use InDesign through user experience and recognize how the help provided by Adobe could be improved. We created the online help in RoboHelp, edited and revised as needed, published the online help online, created CD copies for each writer, and created an automatic index in RoboHelp within a semester, meeting the deadline.
- **Changes after publication and why:** The project was not updated after publication.

Team Analysis and Plan

After estimating the users' needs, we developed the following objectives for the project:

- Start at a fairly basic level.
- Introduce and explain the terminology.
- Explain and show users the technological features.
- Produce a user-friendly help system that anyone can use with or without time constraints.

My Process

My responsibility was to create most of the Text section. The Text section was the longest section, so some sub-topics were assigned to other writers to evenly distribute the work. My objective was to create clear, concise, and user-friendly content that would help beginners add and manipulate text. I determined the order of the topics by thinking of what readers must do to add text and the order of steps that readers would most likely want to follow when enhancing that text. For example, a reader would have to know how to create a text box before doing anything else with text; therefore, "Creating a Text Box" is the first topic. Following that topic is the task that I assumed readers would want and need to perform next: typing or inserting text.

After inserting text, users would likely want to customize or design the document by experimenting with different typefaces and font sizes. Because the users would range from novices to experts, I knew that the novices would feel more comfortable using InDesign by relating it to a similar tool: Microsoft Word. I chose the InDesign help topics by thinking of tasks

users would likely know how to do and would want to do in Word. These would be the tasks users would likely want to do in InDesign.

I felt that readers needed clear instructions, graphics to exhibit how certain elements and tools look, helpful tips, headings, and sub-headings. Therefore, I used SnagIt to take screenshots of tools, menu bars, and whatever else that visuals would help clarify. I included tips to provide additional, helpful information not covered in the procedures. To increase readability and usability, I used headings and sub-headings for easy scanning and clear organization. Sub-headings indicate a transition from one procedure to the next within a page.

I had an opportunity to test the documentation while creating it to understand what changes were needed. Usability testing should be performed whenever possible because it can help the writer enhance a document/project by giving the writer a new perspective from someone not as involved as the writer: the user. Usability testing saves money, time, and other resources that may have been attributed to projects by testing the effectiveness and use of the product before too much has been attributed to a possible useless product.

When I conducted usability testing for my section, I had not generated a Table of Contents (TOC). The topics were in alphabetical order; therefore, I had to direct the users on what topic to click next so that information was sequential and would flow together like paragraphs in an essay. Usability testing revealed that I needed to organize the topics in the TOC by tasks: what a user would likely want to know first, second, third, and so on.

Testing also revealed the following:

- I needed to add more pictures, especially to show what a drop-down menu looks like.
- Users needed to know how to hide the color palette because it distracted some of them when extended.
- Some of my pictures confused the users because some pictures showed more than the specific things that the users needed to pay attention to. This extended view helped the users know in what vicinity tools, menus, etc. were located but revealed too much for the user to recognize the specific focal point in the picture. I solved this problem by drawing a red circle around the specific focal point in each picture, calling out the focal point.
- Some users did not know where the menu bar was or where to locate the **Object** menu. I added a picture of the menu bar and called out the **Object** menu with a red circle around it.
- Some important information was missing, like steps in procedures and an important tip about bolding and italicizing certain fonts.