

# Structured Authoring: Is it for you?



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The world of technical writing has the phrase called structured authoring or structured content authoring. The concept of structured authoring is not new, fundamentals of it was first introduced in late 1960s/early 1970s. The process of structuring was common until advent of markup languages in 1990s. During early days of technical documentation, authors used to develop a style guide which was a documented approach on how to define the content in a formatted manner. Style guide also says how many heading levels deep an article would go, images handling, grammatical choices like “to use or not to use Oxford comma”. Author sticking to style guide used to be a self-policing and was often double checked by editors.

Structured authoring is relatively close to style guide with set of rules and set of logic statements enforced by a machine. In this case, if any author breaks the rules while creating content then that content will be flagged as invalid. Perhaps, wasting so much of valuable time on formatting errors and documenting them seems a time to implement structured authoring. Below is some of the information related to structured authoring and how to implement it for authors benefit. It may be hard/time consuming to implement yet benefits in the form of quality, consistency, search ability, and overall flexibility of a structured environment will be well worth out of it.

## Briefing About Structured Authoring

To define structured authoring is a flow of work for a technical document where the content is controlled by set of predefined rules. This is underpinning the future automated publishing process. Structuring facilitates control over content, manageable content, conversion into different formats, and ensures consistency of the underlying code of the content.

## Adapting Structured Authoring

When you decide to adapt or move some documents from an unstructured framework or MS word to predefined structured authoring format, you encounter a challenge of wide world of options. Make sure to consider a strategic plan before you move to new environment. To begin with you better understand what you need, how you get in there to make content simple and readable. The framework of content should be useful, feasible, accurate, should suit its function, and more importantly it can be easily usable and repurposable.

## What Are The Changes That Occur When Move The Content To Structured Authoring?

- 1. Centralized style management:** The content from freestyle to structured, completely separates the raw format into a uniform style. This inline styling of the formatted content allows you stick to focus more on well-versed information. The same will be sent to multiple style sheets to create different outputs (PDF, HTML, etc.).
- 2. Small fragments:** While configuring the content into doctype, long continuous sentences will be divided into small meaningful fragments. This advantageous feature makes to determine the length of fragments. Thus it makes the reader to grasp faster with specified content rather going through the whole book or chapter. Along with easier feature in authoring software, it enables content reuse and shared authoring.
- 3. Re-utilization of Content:** In structured authoring one of the best advantages is a single fragment of same text edit will automatically pull the change to rest of the files. There is no necessity of opening each document and similarly content reuse can be implemented at multiple levels. One can also create items or units to reuse even at phrase or word level.

4. **Team Work as one:** In unstructured authoring, each person has to work individually in their personal logins and later share work, which leads to number of revises. Structured authoring in changes this since it is hosted on server/cloud. All the authors can have access to the same and can work together as one. With fragmented files multiple authors can work at a time on the same content or document simultaneously by sharing their views. The best thing while working together is content management that prevents authors conflicts of interest on files. More and more collaborative work will be encouraged by structured authoring.
5. **Consistency of Text:** Every author prefers his/her own style of writing format like some writers prefer to align center in black background and some writers prefer left alignment in a text box. Though these changes can be modified by formatting manually after completion of the document, it's a time consuming and shows text inconsistency. Yet, structured authoring overcomes all these issues and put all in same location and with similar style. Structured authoring will not let authors to follow various styles; schema in it allows using specific content in defined locations and style sheets format the output. Final productivity enforces consistency among authors.

## Can any one Implement Structured Authoring?

The answer is NO structured authoring is not the solution for all types of developmental workflows. Sometimes it may create a confusion situation with negative impact than expected positive hope. The novice writers may face difficulty due to lack of control over the final yield of the content. Here are the some examples of unsuccessful structured authoring:

- Companies with hundreds to thousands of pages need structured authoring and content management systems. Whereas an organization with only few pages of content does not meet the implementation cost and sees more unusability than usability.
- Creative writing type of content where companies needs to follow, explore, work new subjects does not require structured authoring. It's because they don't reuse the content often and don't manage the past content.
- Some of the content like day-to-day business documents, e-mail communications, memos will not fit for structuring as they are not reusing it.
- Before implementing structured authoring, one must have expert in handling it. Without that person effort, investment would go waste and implementation going to be waste.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, many of the businesses are running in old pattern of word, pdf conversions, emailing word documents, etc. Adopting modern technology is becoming mandatory as the amount and diversity of content created by writer is growing swiftly. Structured authoring will no longer encourage using old methodology and slow processes. Especially companies who are working on regulated documents need to adopt it to avoid risks and violation of compliance standards.

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