

against *the* wall:

By Hans Fenstermacher

content from the user's perspective

Ever wonder which wall they're talking about in the "over-the-wall" syndrome? You know, the idea that technical writers create content, then lob it over the wall to localizers, who do whatever it is they do. I know what you're thinking: It's the wall of the silos that technical writers (or localizers, depending on your perspective) live in. Yes, but there are also fundamentally more troublesome barriers here. That's because writers spend a lot of time building walls into content, not just around it.

Quite apart from the difficult workflow problems inherent in the over-the-wall syndrome, the walls writers build into technical content are a big problem. They create multilingual development issues, raise production costs, and increase time to market. But that's only our own side of the story. Let's consider (for a change) how end-users are affected by these walls, for, make no mistake, the barriers are just as good at blocking them out.

QUANTITY 1: QUALITY 0

Yogi Berra once said, "No wonder nobody ever goes there; it's always so crowded." What he meant, in inimitable Berraesque fashion, was exactly the opposite.

The crowd is so big that it's blocking access, so people can't get in. Technical content is like that, too; words crowd every line, screen, and page so much that users can't "get in" to discern meaning, for example:

The first step in creating a drawing from an existing part or assembly is to create a new drawing XYZ file by either clicking the New icon from the What To Do section of the Getting Started page and then clicking the Default.xyz icon from the Default template tab (as shown in the following image), or clicking New from the File menu, or clicking the down arrow on the New icon from the left side of the Standard toolbar and clicking Drawing.



For content like this, users aren't going to wait in line for hours to "get in" (we're not talking trendy hip-hop club here). And if users don't get in, whatever they're looking for might as well not exist. This profusion of words, or information or what-have-you, creates an impenetrable wall between the product and

the end-users that even high production values can't overcome.

So, how do we content developers deal with these walls? Instead of trying to lower them, we rearrange the content bricks. We develop ways to reuse as much as possible (single-sourcing); we create systems for storing and managing (content management); and we apply tools for multilingual streamlining (translation

