

## no information

By Hans Fenstermacher

### like No-information

Content authors are in the information business. Their jobs are to create, architect, design, write, localize, deliver, and ultimately consume information. They relentlessly meet the voracious demands of the Information Age, but they also have become purveyors of a kind of information twaddle—call it *No-information* (why beat around the bush?)—that threatens the quality of their work.

To understand *No-information*, let's first be clear on what information is. Like obscenity, information is hard to define, but (also like obscenity) we tend to recognize it when we see it. Simply put, information is that which tells us something we didn't already know.

No-information, on the other hand, looks, feels, and sounds a lot like information. No-information requires the same amount of time, resources, and development as information. No-information additionally takes the same amount of resources, time, and money to localize. And end-users will likely give No-information the same amount of attention and time as real information.

Come to think of it, No-information is exactly like regular information in every respect, except one: it doesn't inform you of anything (witness the very first

sentence in this article!) No-information is treacherous because it takes away time, resources, money, and attention from everyone who touches it. It's also exasperating to end-users, who instinctively recognize it for what it is not: informative. Here are some of the many forms No-information can take (all examples are from real content:)

#### Obvious No-information

The simplest form of No-information is the obvious form. This means facts, data, or concepts that are well known by or self evident to the intended recipients. Obvious No-information comes in all shapes and sizes:

From an enterprise software setup guide: *"This guide is designed to assist you in setting up XYZ. There are many ways to set up and use XYZ. At [our company], we use XYZ to run our software business, which is in some ways similar to many businesses and in some ways very different."*

Notice the company's example of how it uses its own software? Even that excludes any real information!

From a software user guide: *"Using computers within the corporate environment has made it easy to create documents that might contain mission-critical information."*

It's difficult to argue with that; it's equally difficult to learn anything from it.

From a UNIX system administrator's guide: *"Place the CD in the CD-ROM drive label side up."*

Surely, you jest!

### **Tautological No-information**

No-information can also be camouflaged by truth and accuracy. Much to our great chagrin, however, truth and accuracy are not sufficient or even necessary conditions for information. All information is required to do is tell us something we don't know. On this score, No-information tautologies (redundant repetitions) give real information the widest possible berth. To wit:

From an operator's guide: *"Using other settings may cause very random and unpredictable results."*

Except possibly for the subtlest of distinctions among persnickety statisticians, "random and unpredictable" is a redundant repetition. Furthermore, the qualification of random with "very" is gilding the lily, to say the least.

From a modem user guide: *"This modem provides reliable data communication to meet a variety of needs."*

By definition, modems provide data communication, presumably doing so reliably. Sadly, the exact nature of the "variety" of needs this modem meets is left to our overactive imaginations.

### **No-information—once again with feeling**

The expansive repertoire of No-information includes another form similar to the first two above. Here, previously known information, or even previously known No-information, is freshly restated as if this new presentation would somehow magically infuse the No-information with meaning. Generally, this phenomenon is attributed to a lack of editing (a get-out-of-jail-free card that technical writers produce far too readily and far too often,) but it may actually originate in the writer's primal urge to find the real meaning that they know deep-down isn't there.

Header from a hardware guide: *"Troubleshooting Problems"*

Does the product unusually require troubleshooting those things that work properly?

From any software user guide: *"Close any open software programs that are running on your computer."*

The writer felt the need to explain that "closing" is something you do to things that are open, and that open programs are those that are running on a computer. Presumably, "Close all programs" would have been just too short and obviously ill-mannered.

### **S&M-style No-information**

In today's competitive marketplace, there is an imperative to constantly reinforce product advantage and superiority. Here, No-information digs in its stiletto S&M heels (umm..., that's Sales & Marketing...).

Most user content is created to accompany products that have already been sold. Why, then, do content authors insist on reinforcing the wisdom of the user's purchasing decision? This form of No-information comes in small occurrences, through editorializing adjectives or judgmental interjections such as *Welcome!* or *Thank you!* Or *Congratulations!* or even in lengthy paeans to the product. Either way, S&M No-information adds cost and time to every phase of content development, and then robs the end user of his or her anticipated reward (information). Note this example from a printing system

guide: "Welcome! The XYZ User Guide was created to provide you with information and demonstrate the key features of the XYZ application. XYZ is a robust, state-of-the-art system for... [bulleted list]"

Does anyone ever read that stuff?

### Bridge over the River No-information

No-information also stems from the urges in all content authors for logic and structure. One of the most common is the "bridging" urge, the desire to smooth over perceived abrupt shifts in a linear thought process. This urge is admirable—provided the writing is being graded by a teacher on the use of the "topic sentence." But in the real world of technical content, linearity is often unnecessary, impossible, or even disruptive. End users do not live in a world of narrative prose that must make sense from cover to cover; theirs is a jumble of context-sensitive help, reference material, and troubleshooting—where content is expected to be self-contained and usable in chunks.

Technical authors demonstrate their bridging urge through self-imposed segues that link topics, through introductions designed to avoid mental jack-rabbit starts, and through summaries softly placed to prevent user whiplash when a topic ends. This bridging No-information fails to understand that users do not read sequentially and that other content devices already play whatever minimal bridging role may be needed. For instance, bold headers in a different typeface that visibly introduce the next topic. Here are some classic bridges:

From a software user guide: "The next section describes how to manage files." (Followed by the subhead "Managing Files.")

This topic-ending sentence is usually more useful to the writer as a mental sticky note about what's next; too bad it can't be removed as easily.

From an anti-virus software guide:

"Creating a Schedule to Update XYZ

"Creating a schedule to update XYZ is a simple procedure: ..." (followed by two steps.)

Two steps qualify as "simple" in anyone's book. Why it's necessary to introduce and characterize the two steps is beyond me.

### No-information on a (tem)plate

The last No-information type, like the previous one, has a single-minded purpose: impose structure at all costs. This goal is usually handily accomplished (including the cost part) by allowing a predefined template to control content decisions. Overly rigid templates can turn real information into No-information. For instance, take the

rule of following every header with a stem sentence (an introduction.) Many times this results in saying the same thing again. Then there's the rule that every table must be formally announced by a descriptive sentence (any self-respecting table title ought to be able to perform this function on its own.) Or the rule requiring that every possible screenshot in a procedure be displayed, whether there's anything to do or see in it or not (ugh.)

Templates should exist to provide a framework for content authors, not a straightjacket. Templates should be tight enough to keep information from falling all over the place, but loose enough to allow common sense to fit in. And when I say common sense, I mean the end user's common sense, not the writer's (can you imagine any "normal" user complaining about a missing stem sentence?!) Here, for your delectation, is an example of No-information served on a template:

## Chapter 1 Installing the XYZ

**At a Glance**

**Purpose**  
This chapter describes how to install and set up the XYZ. It also lists the system requirements for installation and setup.

**In this Chapter**  
This chapter contains the following topics:

- System requirements
- Installing the XYZ
- Setting up the XYZ

Naturally, the guide also contains a complete table of contents and index. It's also noteworthy that the bulleted list for "In this Chapter" does not consist of cross-references, but re-keyed entries. (Go figure.)

### Conclusion

No doubt, there are other types of No-information. While they may seem harmless, even amusing, do not be fooled: No-information is a threat to the usability and cost of all technical content. Authors should take pains to eliminate it ruthlessly. The rewards will be great for themselves and, more importantly, for the rest of us.

### About the Author:

Hans is president and founder of ArchiText Inc., a globalization and localization services company, and founding Chairman of the Board of GALA. At ArchiText he has pioneered ABREVE Connect, a globalization services and training program that helps companies implement a global content strategy and save localization costs.

