

and the Art of  
**Online Help**

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# What is Zen?

- What the dictionary says.
- What does the definition mean to us?
- How does the definition apply to us as technical writers?



# How Can Zen Work for Us?



- What makes online help effective?
- What are some of our limitations as online help authors?
- What are others doing?
- What does this have to do with Zen, anyway?

# Typical Online Help Problems

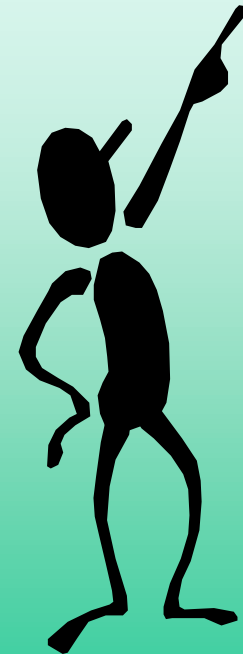
- Too much overview information.
- Can't find the right topic.
- Missing or hidden steps.
- The information (or its terminology) is unclear.
- Not enough synonyms in the index.



# How People Learn

- Most learn by seeing, writing, and doing.
- Some learn by example.
- As always, know your audience.
- New evidence: don't break the flow ...

$$1 + 1 = 3$$

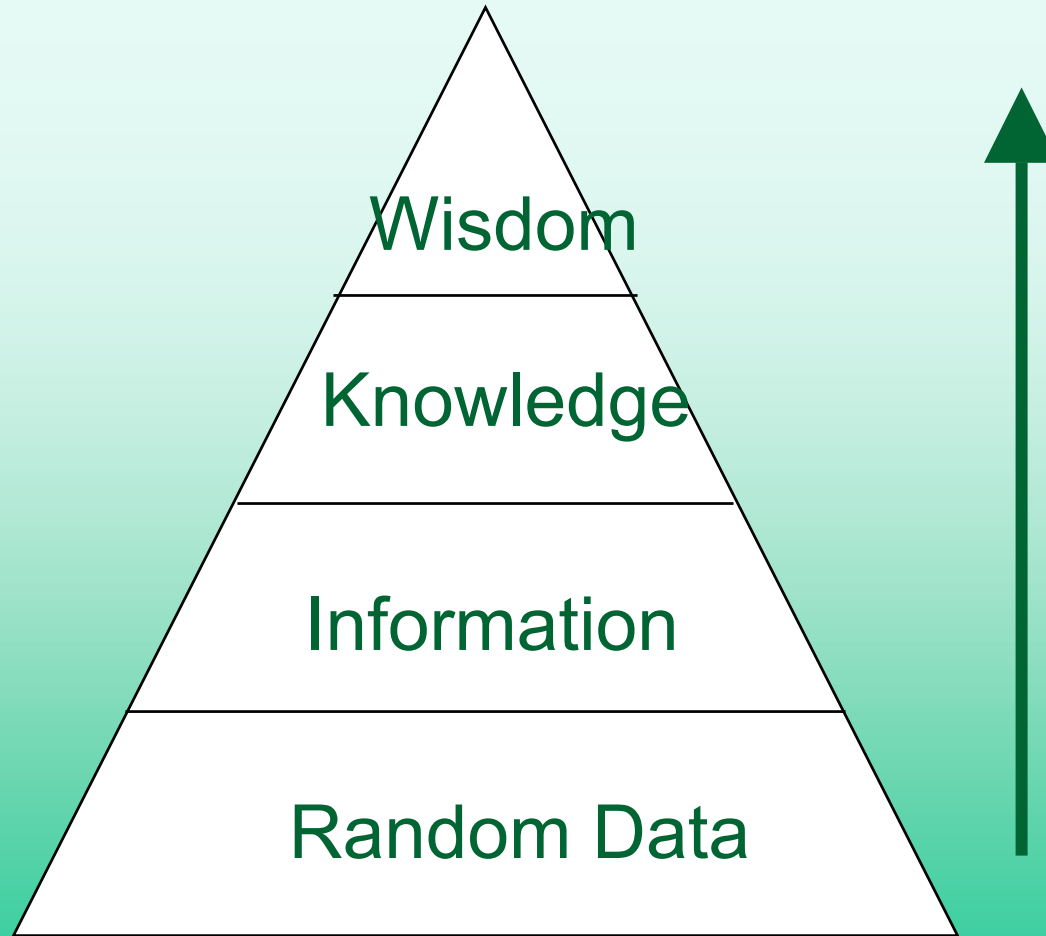


# What is a Mental Model?

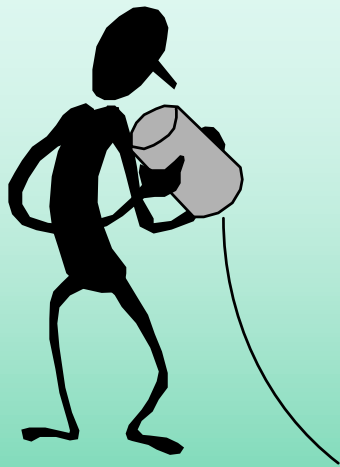


- How does it apply to software?
- What are the implications for online help?
- How to overcome the users' mental model.

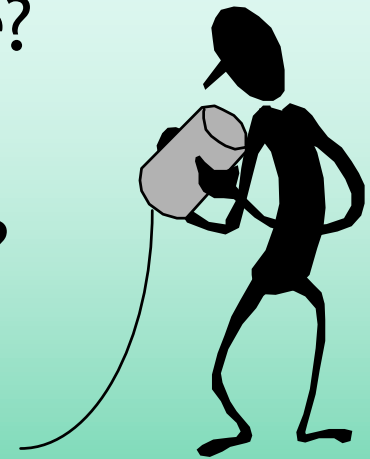
# The Data Pyramid



# Information Exchange Ideas



- Why does the Data Pyramid matter to me?
- Can you apply this strategy to your work?
- What does this mean to us as technical communicators?



# Types of Information Transfer

(from most expensive to least expensive)

1. Technical support
2. Classroom training
3. Printed tutorials
4. Online tutorials
5. Reference manuals
6. User's guides
7. Online help
8. Wizards, cue cards, and embedded help
9. Product interface design

# Online Help's Costs vs. Benefits



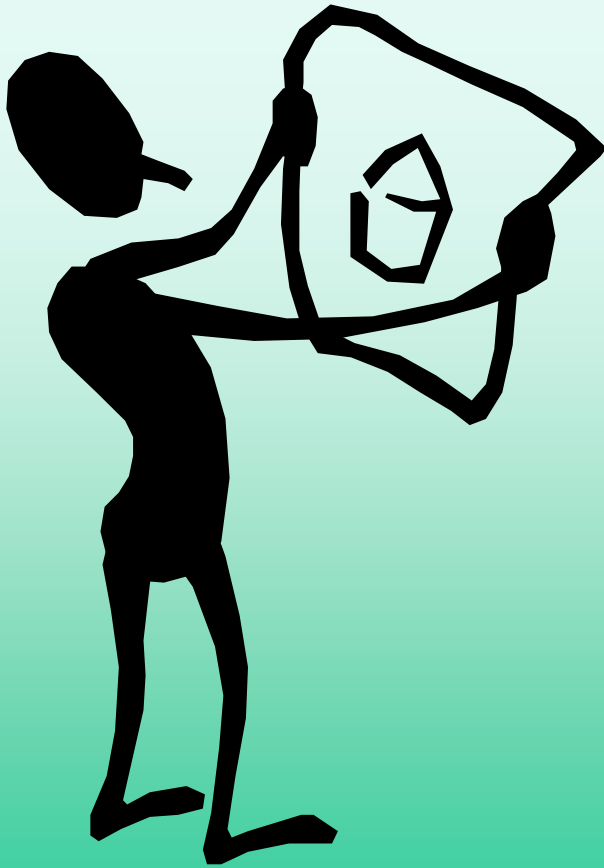
- How much does it cost for online help?
- How else could you deliver the same information?
- What is the difference in price (now and over time)?
- What are the other factors?

# Putting It All Together

- The three key design traits:
  1. Bridge gaps.
  2. Supply roadmaps.
  3. Be clear.
- Be consistent.
- Conduct usability testing!
- When possible, put the help information into the user interface.



# Summary



- See the big picture.
- Find the core issues.
- Address the target audience.
- Deliver the right information at the right time ...
- Help users solve their problems.

# Bibliography

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