



# Writing and Web 2.0

BY KEITH M. HOFFMAN, *Member*

All of us are familiar with the general process of communicating technical information: a writer handles the research, interviews subject matter experts, writes a draft, sends it for review, makes changes, and possibly tests the document with a subset of the intended audience. This process, with some variations, has remained steady for years—until now. Thanks to Web 2.0, this process is changing.

Generally, Web 2.0 is bringing about a transition from desktop-based tools and applications to Web-based tools and applications. “Web 2.0,” writes Ian Davis on his blog “Internet Alchemy,”

is an attitude, not a technology. It’s about enabling and encouraging participation through open applications and services. By open I mean *technically open* with appropriate APIs [application programming interfaces], but also, more importantly, *socially open*, with rights granted to use the content in new and exciting contexts. ([iandavis.com/blog](http://iandavis.com/blog), July 4, 2005)

And that definition leads to an almost certain impact on the technical communication profession.

## Web 2.0 and Information Distribution

Below, I discuss the major means of communication associated with Web 2.0. This list is certainly not exhaustive, but it covers many generally recognized characteristics of Web 2.0.

### Social Networking

A community, whether virtual or real, is defined by the relationships that exist between its members. Social networking in the real world allows people to make interpersonal connections on a daily basis, such as those that occur at a hockey game, a church, or a school. People who share values and interests can create strong communities, foster a sense of belonging, and allow for the give and take of debate.

In the virtual world, social networking sites like MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)), Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), and LinkedIn ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)) offer the same types of connections. Facebook, which started as a small community of friends, kept expanding until it became what it is today: one of the most frequently visited sites on the Web, with thousands of new accounts created every day. The principles of community building and social networking found in the real world apply to the Web as well.

### Ajax-based Web Sites

Asynchronous JavaScript and XML, or Ajax, is a combination of Web-development techniques that allow

for more interactive Web pages; faster page load times; and more usable, responsive applications. Many new, Web-based word processing and content-management systems are being built within the Ajax framework.

On a typical Web page, when users decide they want to get to a new page or request information from a server, they are often left waiting—for the browser to send the request to the server, for the server to figure out the request and respond, for the new page to display. But when an Ajax page is loaded, an Ajax engine handles all communication between the browser and the server, passing and displaying information from the server in near-real time. The user is never left staring at an hour glass or a blank screen.

If you've ever used Google Maps ([maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com)), you've seen Ajax in action. When you zoom in and click around Google maps, you don't have to wait very long to see the results of your actions. The Ajax engine constantly loads information relevant to the area you're zooming in on, anticipating where you may go next, and keeps that information nearby in case you request

it. The results are short wait times, quick responses, and a very usable map.

### Blogs

As you probably know, a blog is a Web site where entries are made in journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food or politics; some function as online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, Web pages, and media related to the topic. Most blogs are primarily textual—although some focus on photographs (photoblog), videos (vlog), or audio (podcasting)—and are part of a wider network of social media.

Heera Hasan at the Online Journalism wiki ([www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/writing](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/wiki/writing)) states that great bloggers see their posts as the first comment in a conversation, rather than the final word on that particular topic. And 44 percent of bloggers have taken material they found online—songs, text, or images—and remixed it into their own artistic creations. This open concept represents a change in how some authors perceive their ownership of content.



### Wikis

According to Wikipedia (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\_Page*), the most famous wiki of all, “a wiki is a type of Web site that allows the visitors themselves to easily add, remove, and otherwise edit and change some available content, sometimes without the need for registration.” An excellent way of gathering collective intelligence, wikis are often used as internal documentation for in-house systems and applications.

The ease of interaction and operation they foster makes wikis effective tools for collaborative authoring. The term *wiki* can also refer to the collaborative software (the wiki engine) that facilitates the operation of such a Web site. These easy-to-use tools allow everyone to contribute to a knowledge base.

### Podcasts

Podcasting is the method of distributing multimedia files such as audio or video programs over the Internet using syndication feeds for playback on mobile devices and personal computers. The term *podcast*, like *radio*, can mean both the content and the method of delivery. Although podcasters’ Web sites may offer direct downloading or streaming of their content, podcasts can also be downloaded automatically using software capable of reading feeds, like RSS or *Atom*. This characteristic distinguishes podcasting from other digital audio formats. Free tools such as *Audacity* (*audacity.sourceforge.net*) for audio editing allow just about anyone to produce podcast-worthy content, and online tools such as *Odeo* (*odeo.com*) make podcasting even easier by allowing users to record directly on the Web without installing any software.

### RSS

Really simple syndication (RSS) is a simple XML-based system that allows users to subscribe to their favorite Web sites. Using RSS, webmasters can put their content into a standardized format, which can be viewed and organized through RSS-aware software.

A program known as a feed reader or aggregator can check a list of feeds on behalf of a user and display any updated

articles that it finds. It is common to find Web feeds on major Web sites and even many smaller ones. Some Web sites let people choose between RSS- or *Atom*-formatted Web feeds; others offer only RSS or *Atom*.

RSS feeds allow users to decide how and when they receive information, largely mitigating the power to distribute information how and when providers see fit. Users don’t even have to come to a Web site to get the latest: they are automatically notified when something new happens and can get the information when they choose.

### Web 2.0 and the Way We Write

Dan Anderson of the University of North Carolina conveys on his blog (*sites.unc.edu/daniel*) the most accurate depiction of the current state of writing I have found. According to Anderson’s entry for July 28, 2006, a writer today needs to do the following:

- Conceptualize networks
- Find and move materials
- Make rights decisions
- Edit images
- Edit sounds
- Use a movie or authorware program
- Compose prose

As the collaborative nature of the Web begins to affect mainstream users, and new forms of technology become readily accessible, writers will be asked to work in new media and environments.

The ability to conceptualize networks is a key point in the shift to Web 2.0 communications. Blogs, wikis, and other Web 2.0 tools are the means by which communities are established on today’s Internet. These tools allow for the open exchange of ideas and promote collaboration in ways that haven’t been available before.

In addition, the blogging and wiki communities are accessing tools and technologies above and beyond word processors. According to a July 2006 report of the Pew Internet and American Life Project (*www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report\_display.asp*), four out of five bloggers (80 percent) post text to their blog, but nearly as many (72

percent) display photos on their blog. Nearly half of all bloggers (49 percent) say they have posted images other than photos to their blog—items such as drawings, graphs, or clip art. Close to a third (30 percent) of bloggers report posting audio files to their blog, and another 15 percent vlog or post video files to their blog.

With that kind of communication becoming the core of Web 2.0, technical writers are going to be asked to compose in ways that stretch their current abilities. You can no longer rely on creating content just one way, with one tool. Think about the last piece of documentation you wrote. Could you have created a video tutorial explaining a certain process? Could you have recorded and edited an audio podcast with the application developer explaining the new features of the product? Could you have helped your developer create a blog detailing the progress of the work on the product? As these tools become more and more accepted in the corporate world, all writers are going to need to understand how to use them and how to produce effective content for them.

### Ajax and Web-based Word Processors

Web 2.0 is also introducing a new generation of content creation in the form of Web-based word processors built on Ajax Web development principles. If you have a Web browser and access to the Internet, you can write just about anything using a free Web-based word processor built on Ajax. Applications such as *Writely* (recently purchased by Google), *Writeboard*, and *Zoho Writer* require only that you sign up for a free account and meet their browser requirements. There is no software to download, and if you already know how to use a desktop word processor such as Microsoft Word, these applications are easy to learn.

All Ajax-based word processors offer essentially the same features. However, the real power comes not from what they offer, but from the mere fact that they exist. Writers are no longer tied to their desktop computing platforms, forced to write in whatever tool the computer manufacturer tells them they must use. Now they can write from any-

where, at any time, without having to worry about software incompatibilities or the inconvenience of lugging around a laptop loaded up with thousands of dollars' worth of software.

On top of the convenience of writing anytime, anywhere, Ajax word processing also unleashes powerful collaboration opportunities. Once you set up an account online, you can invite others to join you in writing a document. Certainly, this type of collaboration has been around for a while, as many desktop word processors allow you to collaborate, edit, and track changes. But Ajax word processors also continuously update the content, usually every ten seconds. If five users are making changes to the document at the same time, they'll be able to see what everyone else is doing in near-real time, ensuring that work is not duplicated. And all of this is done in the same interface. If two people attempt to change the same part of a document, both users are notified immediately, and the loss of content is minimized. Imagine the time you will save by only having to rewrite three words instead of having to compare two whole documents.

Web-based word processing represents a huge leap forward in collaboration for communicators and will pave the way for a shift in technical communication. As Web 2.0 principles become more prevalent, your readers and content contributors will ask for more ways to contribute. And while traditional tools offer some collaboration functionality, Ajax-based word processors offer the most powerful and flexible means of harnessing the collective intelligence of your subject matter experts and, perhaps more important, the collective intelligence of your users and readers. As Ian Davis said, it's about encouraging participation. Web-based word processors are a huge first step in offering a truly collaborative, near-real time experience for anyone who interacts with your content. Opening up your documents and encouraging reader participation will help build a supportive, active community committed to you and your product. Your readers become part of the process—active participants rather than passive receivers of information.

### *Wiki on a Stick*

The real power of wikis is that they facilitate the process of contributing to the collective knowledge of a subject. You don't need to know HTML; just open the wiki in your Web browser and you're able to write, edit, and contribute content. However, wikis have had limitations. For instance, if you want to create your own wiki, you must endure a complex process of setting up a Web host, installing software on a server, and battling to make sure the code is correct. The average user will struggle with these tasks. Further, to use a wiki, you must have Internet access. Most of us live and work in a rapidly changing world, and we can't always guarantee we'll be writing and editing from the same location every time: one day we might be in the office, the next in our basement, and the next on a plane.

A promising solution to these problems is *TiddlyWiki* ([www.tiddlywiki.com](http://www.tiddlywiki.com)). This free wiki software allows you to create personal, self-contained hypertext documents that can be posted to a Web server at a later date, e-mailed to interested parties, or saved to a USB flash drive to create a "wiki on a stick." As creator Jeremy Ruston says, all one needs is a modern Web browser, which means *TiddlyWiki* runs on pretty much any modern computer, running any operating system. The barriers of hosting, installation, and setup are removed. And it's a wiki, so content is still really easy to edit.

To make it truly portable, you can also install the portable version of *Firefox* on your USB flash drive. With the Web browser and *TiddlyWiki* installed on the drive, you have a fully functioning wiki, which you can then publish to your Web server at a later date, e-mail to a colleague or friend, or simply use as your own personal notebook for organizing information and developing content.

Although you create the information away from the Internet, your finished product is released in truly collaborative formats, allowing your readers to interact with, add to, or remix your content as they see fit—a key principle of Web 2.0.

### What Does It All Mean?

The evolution of the Internet from a static collection of Web pages to a living, breathing, social network is changing the way people create, write, edit, and interact with content. From rich Internet applications and Ajax to Web-based word processing, the shift to a truly collaborative effort to harness the collective intelligence is in full swing.

As content developers, we can no longer rely on one tool and one outcome. Instead, we need the versatility to jump from the written word to the video screen to the audio editor without compromising the message.

As writers and content developers, it's up to us to understand and apply these tools to further our profession. **1**

### SUGGESTED READINGS

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*Keith Hoffman is a Senior Communications Specialist at Berbee Information Networks Corporation in Madison, Wisconsin, and is the president of the Four Lakes Chapter STC. He can be reached at [keith.hoffman@berbee.com](mailto:keith.hoffman@berbee.com).*