

Helping Caterpillars Fly

LCA 2017: Docs Down Under

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<https://github.com/nicolan/lca2017>



Hi! Who am I?

I'm Nicola.

I like

words



helping people

Hi! Who am I?

I'm Nicola.

I work

at FastMail



on Cyrus

Hi, Who are you?

Hi, Who are you?

Who here:

- likes words

Hi, Who are you?

Who here:

- likes words
- uses free open source software

Hi, Who are you?

Who here:

- likes words
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 - reads documentation

Hi, Who are you?

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 - writes documentation

Hi, Who are you?

Who here:

- likes words
- uses free open source software
 - reads documentation
 - writes documentation
 - has seen a FOSS fail

Hi, Who are you?

Who here:

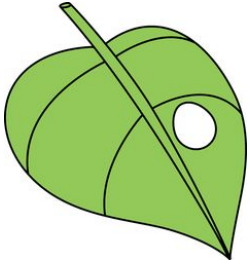
- likes words
- uses free open source software
 - reads documentation
 - writes documentation
 - has seen a FOSS fail
 - ...likes bugs



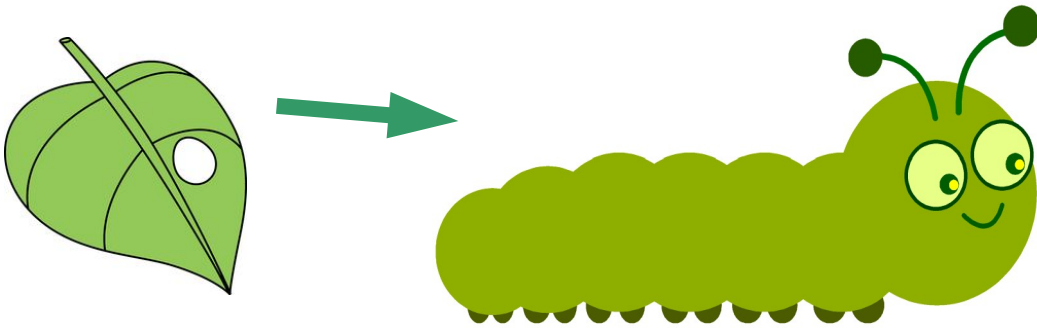
Caterpillars: what the what?

- The lifecycle. Caterpillars and software.
- Cocoons are hard.
- ~~Code~~ Documentation!
- Practical tips

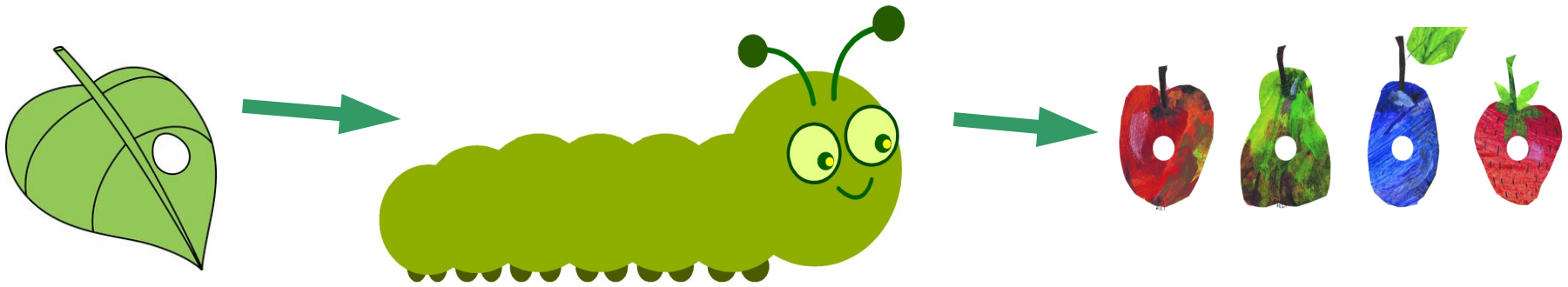
FOSSy the Caterpillar



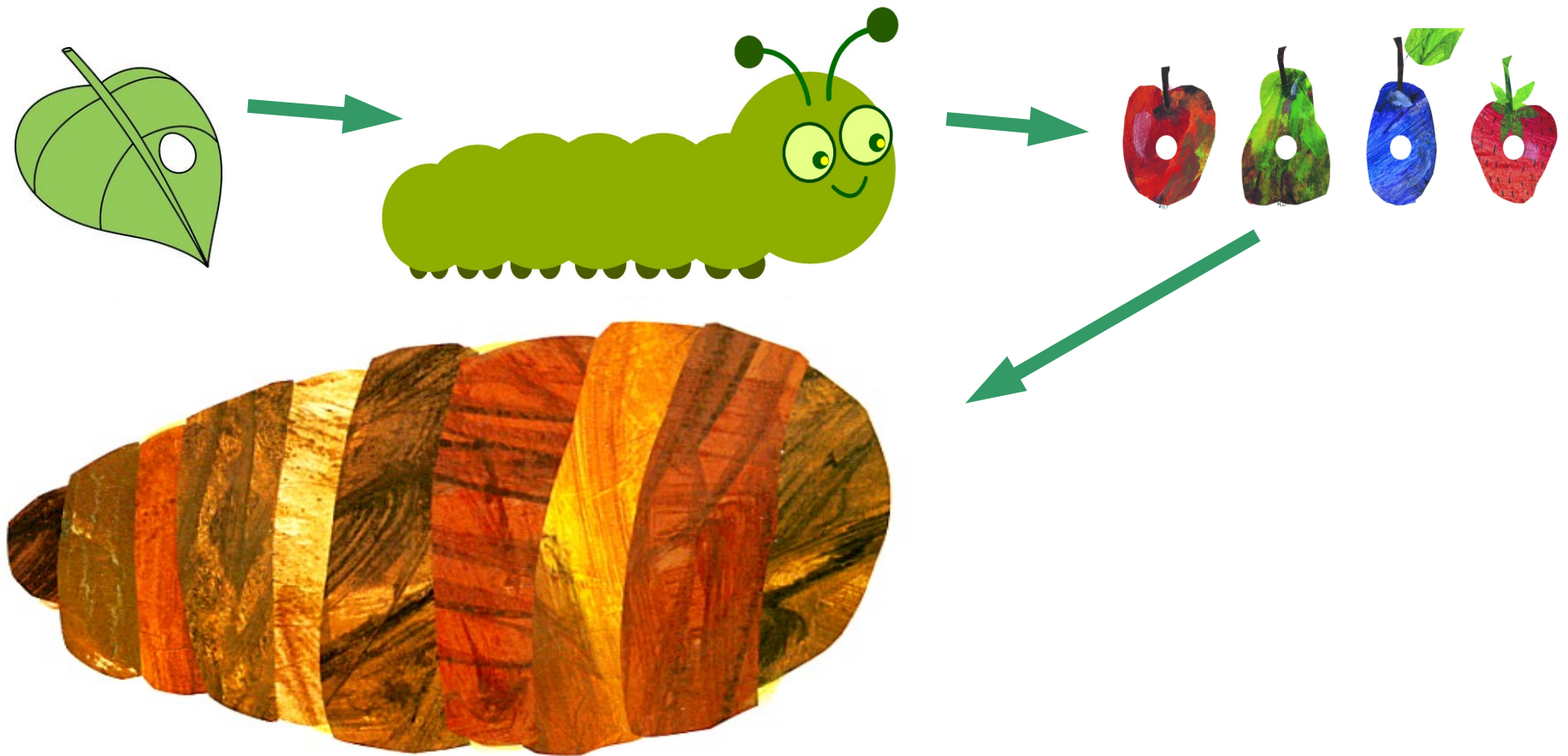
FOSSy the Caterpillar



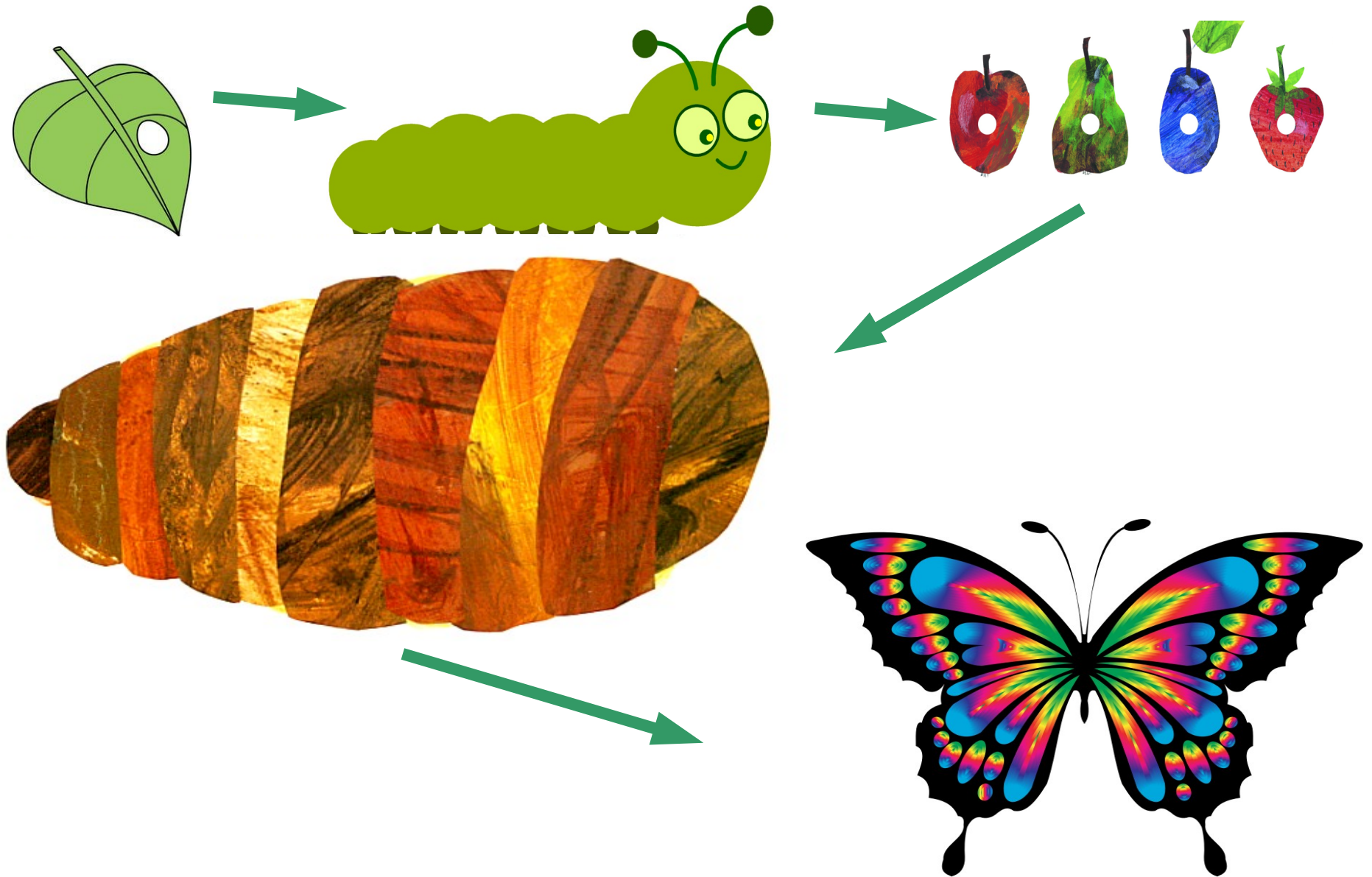
FOSSy the Caterpillar



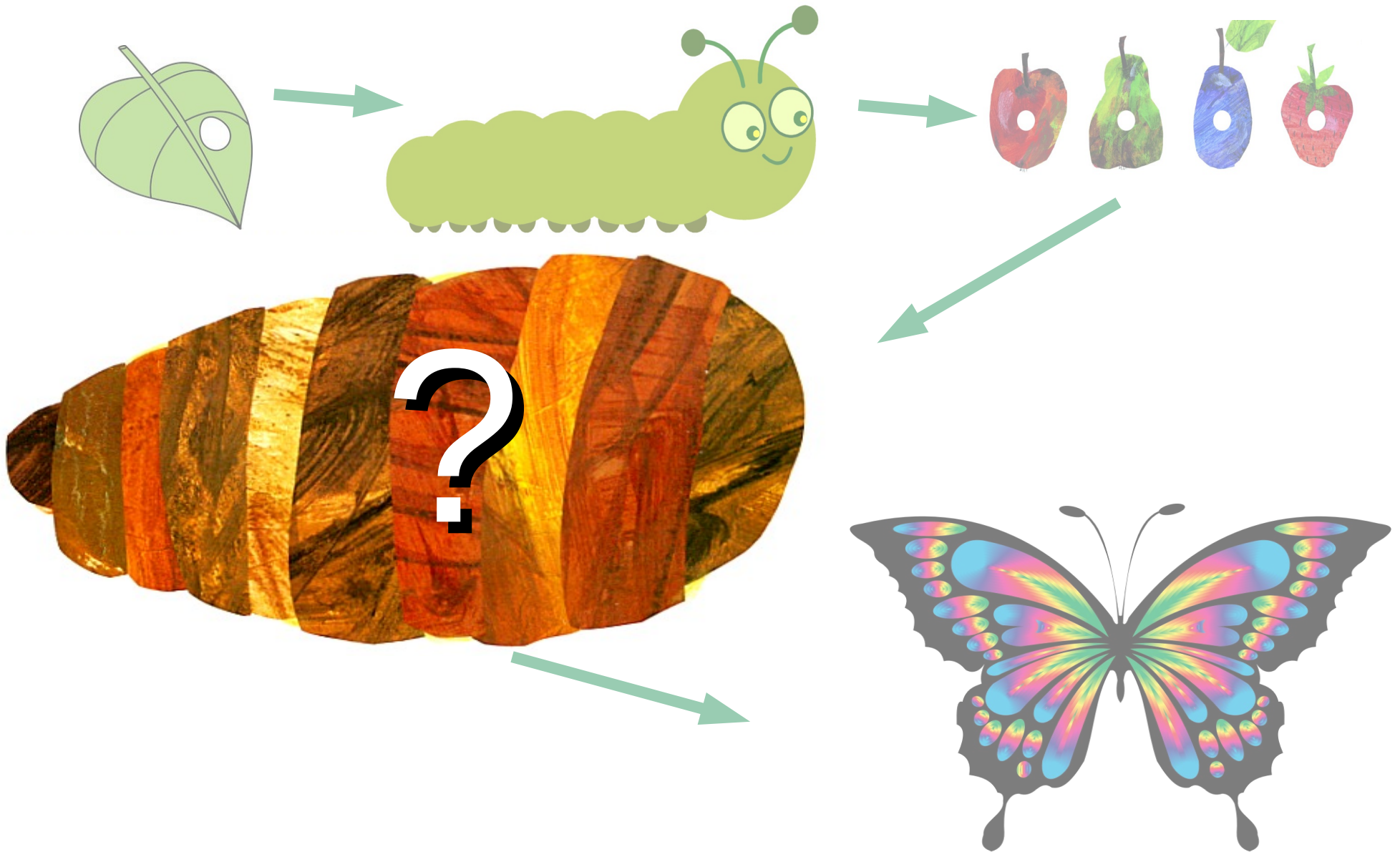
FOSSy the Caterpillar



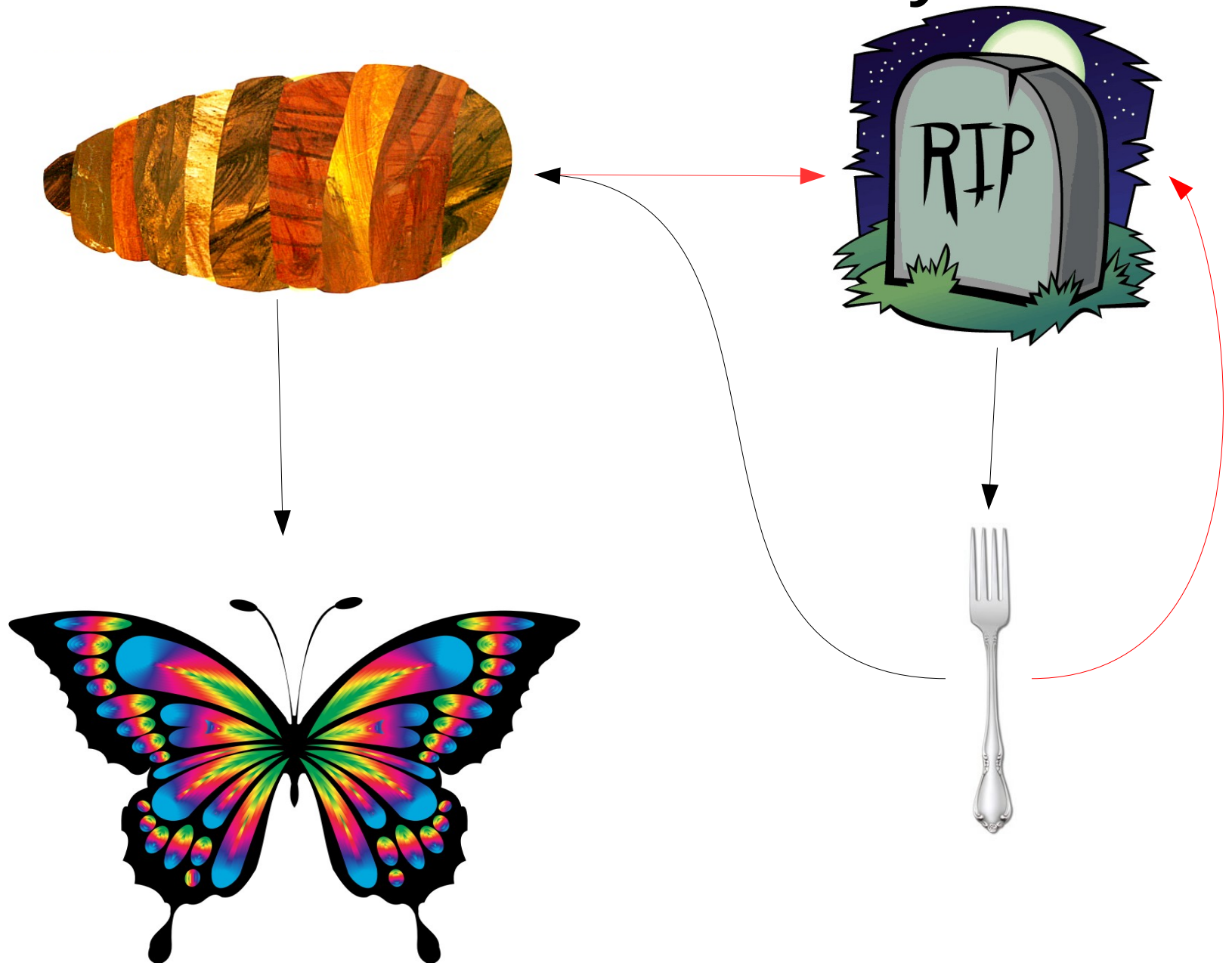
FOSSy the Caterpillar



FOSSy the Caterpillar



The cocoon of criticality



What causes cocoon death?

Boo

No / poor documentation

Contributor turnover

Creeping feature bloat

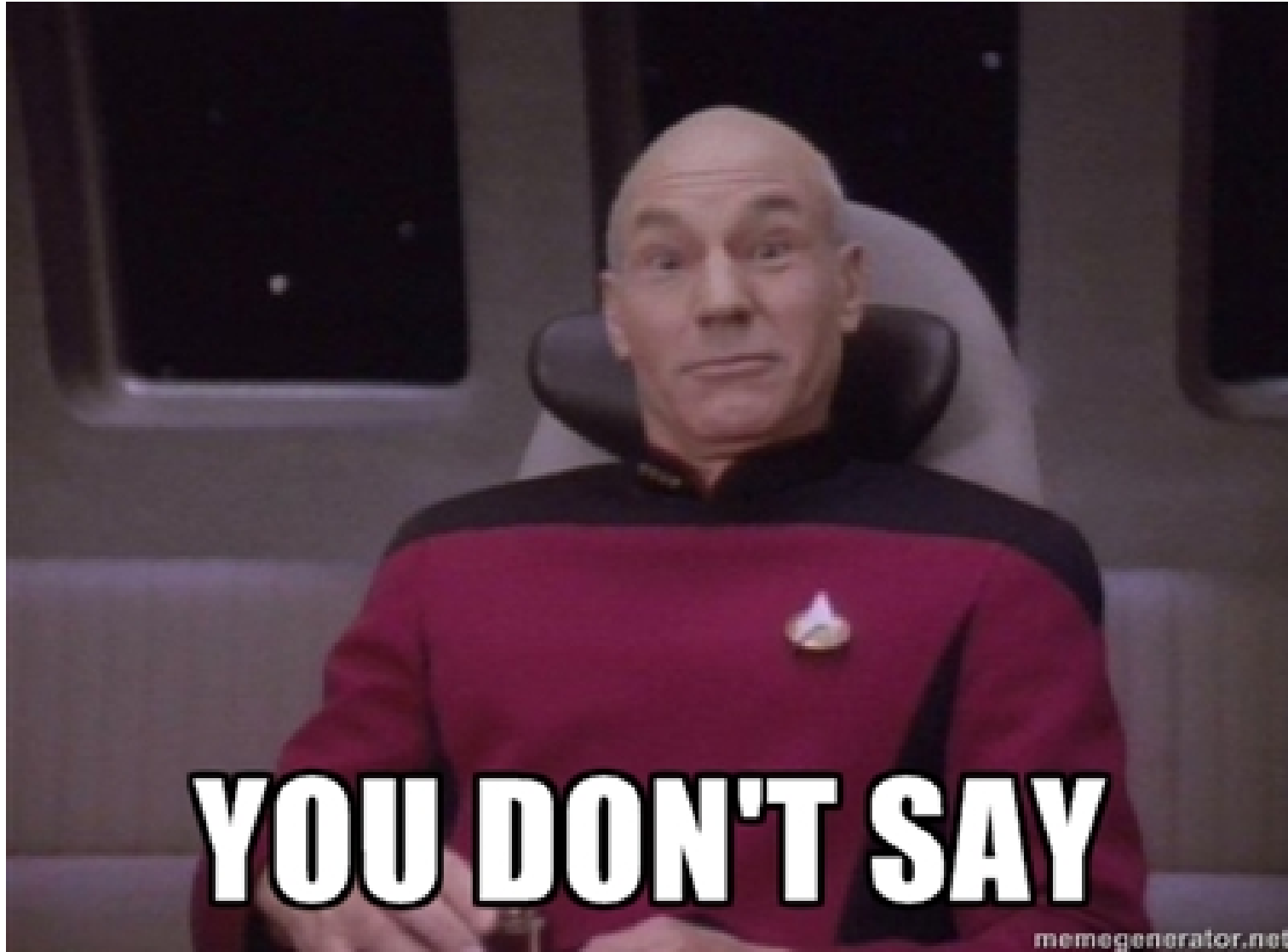
Poor quality

Poor usability

No users



What fixes cocoon death?



What fixes cocoon death?

Boo	Yay
No / poor documentation	Documentation
Contributor turnover	Knowledge sharing
Creeping feature bloat	Define core goals
Poor quality	Document standards
Poor usability	Feedback to developers
No users	Marketing docs – explain what and why

Practical tips - summary

People

Processes

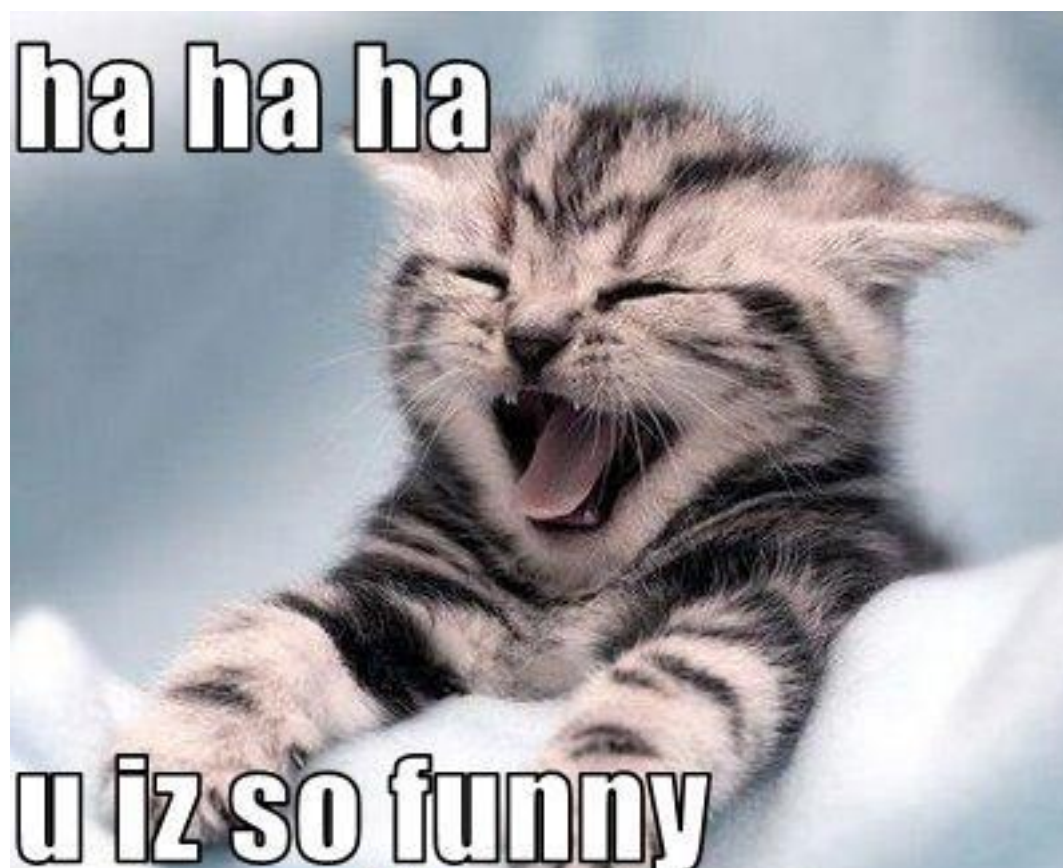
Tools

Danger!

Practical tips - People

- 1) Technical writer
- 2) Audiences
- 3) Communication

People tips #1: pay a TW



People tips #1: pay a TW

- Paid technical writer
 - Identify stakeholder of project
 - Business case
 - Cost/benefit analysis
 - Company already 'paying' for FOSS



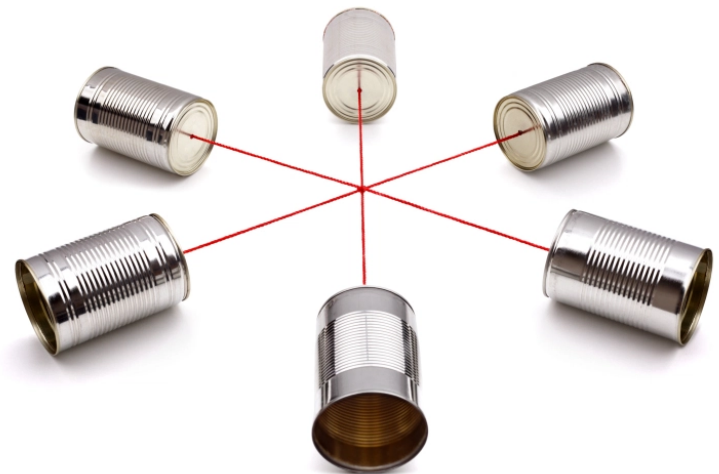
People tips #2: audiences

- Existing user
- Marketing
- New user
- Administrator
- Contributors
- Help me, I saw an error message this one time



People tips #3: communication

- Global contributors. Global users.
- Community
 - Inclusive language
 - Code of conduct
- Mechanisms
 - Realtime chat: slack/IRC
 - Mailing lists, email
 - Issue trackers
 - Meetings: videoconferencing



Practical tips - Processes

- 1) Be a curator
- 2) Regular reviews
- 3) Cleanup

Process tips #1: curator

- Developers
 - Howto
 - Integrate doc process with dev process
 - Make use of dev bug trackers
 - Positive feedback

Process tips #1: curator

- Users
 - Low barrier to entry
 - User-accessible tools
 - Integrate call to action in existing doc
 - Positive feedback: <https://www.happinesspackets.io/>

Process tips #2: regular reviews

- Out of date is worse than none
- Last reviewed date
- SME vs fresh eyes vs users



Process tips #3: Cleanup

- Projects leave old documentation behind.
- Google doesn't know what's old or new.



Practical tips - Tools

- 1) Tool selection
- 2) Templates

Tool tips #1: Selection

- User profile affects output format and location
- Contributor process affects tool choice
- Wiki
- Markdown, Restructured Text, AsciiDoctor
- GitHub
- MadCap Flare, MS Word
- Searchability, Categorisation

Tool tips #2: templates

- What are your document *types*?
- Templates lower barrier to entry
- Consistent style despite many contributors
- Prompts for aspects of content
- Templates support tools, feed processes

Practical tips: danger danger

- Not all documentation is good documentation.
- Danger signs:
 - Lots of FAQs.
 - No introduction for new folks
 - Docs not with code
 - Lack of clear categorisation



Summary

- Cocoon of criticality
- Documentation makes butterflies
- Three most important doc things:
 - Paid documentation advocate
 - Make it easy
 - Regular reviews



Q&A

- Suggestions?
- This can't be the whole list, right?!



Stay in touch!

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