An OASIS DITA Adoption Technical Committee Publication

DITA 1.3 Feature Article: Using DITA 1.3 Troubleshooting

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On behalf of the DITA Adoption Technical Committee

Date: 8 June 2014

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Document History

Revision	Date	Author	Summary
First Draft	2 February 2014	Thomas	Initial draft
Second Draft	30 May 2014	Thomas	Reworked to be a tutorial
Third Draft	8 June 2014	Thomas	All comments incorporated

Table of Contents

Using DITA 1.3 Troubleshooting	4
Troubleshooting information	
Understanding troubleshooting.	5
DITA 1.3 troubleshooting features	
Troubleshooting-topic examples	
Simple troubleshooting topic	
Multiple solutions troubleshooting topic	
Managing complexity	
Complex scenario	14
Embedded troubleshooting examples	19
Task-related	
Task troubleshooting example	
Step troubleshooting example	
Troubleshooting note-type	
Annotated troubleshooting template	



Using DITA 1.3 Troubleshooting

This article briefly describes the troubleshooting information type plus the DITA 1.3 features that support it. Several examples follow that show how to use the new troubleshooting features.

Troubleshooting information

This topic describes the troubleshooting information type.

What is troubleshooting?

Troubleshooting is an information type that provides corrective actions for changing the state of a product or a system to a state that is more desirable. This information can be brief, consisting of just a few sentences. Brief troubleshooting information is embedded within tasks or descriptions. Alternatively, troubleshooting information may be extensive. In these cases, the information is enough to warrant an entire topic.

Simple troubleshooting information

In its simplest form, troubleshooting information provides corrective actions that follows this pattern:

- 1. A condition or symptom. Usually the condition or symptom is an undesirable state in a system, a product, or a service that a reader may wish to correct.
- **2.** A cause for the condition or symptom.
- 3. A remedy for the condition or symptom that restores the system, product, or service to its normal state.

Complex troubleshooting information

In complex cases, there may be more than one possible cause for a condition or a symptom. When this happens, each cause can be presented along with its associated remedy. These cause-remedy pairs serve as successive fixes users can apply to eliminate an undesirable condition.

Embedded troubeshooting

Embedded troubleshooting information appears within tasks or descriptions. It is brief. Despite its reduced size, embedded troubleshooting also follows the condition, cause, remedy pattern. Often, the condition or cause is implied by the information that surrounds it. Remedies are usually conveyed with a single sentence.



Tip:

Extensive amounts of troubleshooting information ought never be embedded. Refer the user to troubleshooting topics instead.

Other corrective action information

Other corrective action information that follows the troubleshooting information type pattern are:

Alarm clearing When something goes wrong, a system returns an alarm from a predefined set of alarms.

Error resolution When something goes wrong, a system returns an error code from a predefined set of error codes.

Event response When a significant event occurs, a system returns an event from a predefined set of events. Some of these events, while not errors, are nonetheless undesirable states that may warrant a response.

Understanding troubleshooting

This topic expalins why troubleshooting information is important.

Users solving problems

Information developers recognize that a high percentage of users seek information only when they experience a problem. First, they become aware of the problem, often because they receive an error message or an outcome they expected fails to occur (for example, "the machine should turn on but does not"). Second, they articulate or define the problem, putting it into words (for example, "I cannot get this font to change size"). At this point, they begin to search for content that might help them solve the problem.

At this stage, the users might be reading the manual, searching for relevant information. However, most manuals "pose formidable obstacles to finding problem-solving information." The Troubleshooting additions to DITA 1.3 are designed to overcome the obstacles and make it easier for users to identify problem-solving information.

Making troubleshooting information easy to find

The Troubleshooting topic addresses the need to provide a template for standard problem-solving information. Writers may provide an error message or a problem statement as a title for a Troubleshooting topic and provide problem-solving advice in a structured form.

However, sometime the problem-solving information is best presented directly in a Task topic by identifying potential mishaps that may occur in the performance of a task and suggested brief methods to avoid them or to recover. DITA 1.3 makes embedded troubleshooting available within a step in a procedure, at the end of a procedure, or as a note type in task, concept, and reference topics. Step Troubleshooting, Task Troubleshooting, and the Troubleshooting Note provide writers the opportunity to label the troubleshooting information with an appropriate marker, like Trouble? or an appropriate icon. The addition of the troubleshooting elements also reminds writers and subject-matter experts that we should consider adding more problem-solving information to our content.

Research by Hans van der Meij, minimalism guru at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, tells us that problemsolving information should be marked by a visual or verbal cue to make it easily accessible to users. We recommend using the cue and image shown in this article or selecting your own to label troubleshooting elements in your content.

These additions to the DITA architecture allow writers to better support the minimalism principle of error recognition and recovery. They make problem-solving information easier to locate and more effectively structured.

DITA 1.3 troubleshooting features

This topic describes DITA 1.3 support for the troubleshooting information type.

What are the troubleshooting features?

DITA 1.3 introduced the following troubleshooting features:

<troubleshooting> topic A new <troubleshooting> topic type that models troubleshooting information-type semantics.

<tasktroubleshooting> In <task> topics, this section-like element is a place for specifying the corrective action to

take when a task fails.

¹ "Does the Manual Help? An Examination of the Problem-Solving Support Offered by Manuals," *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, Vol. 39, No. 3, September 1996.



<steptroubleshooting> In <task> topics, this step sub-element is a place for specifying the corrective action to take

when a step fails.

troubleshooting note-type In the <note> element, the "trouble" note-type is available alongside other <note> @type

values such as "caution", "note", or "tip". The "trouble" note-type contains an incidental

corrective action that pertains to its surrounding content.

Why DITA 1.3 troubleshooting matters

With the new DITA troubleshooting markup, writers can create tightly focused information that helps readers resolve specific problems. Writers can now easily follow consistent patterns for troubleshooting information. This consistency expresses itself in predictable organization, titles, and icon graphics that lets readers quickly locate troubleshooting information.

How do you use it?

Learn more about how to use these features by reading through the examples that follow. Additionally, an annotated template for the troubleshooting topic appears at the end of this article.

Troubleshooting-topic examples

Simple troubleshooting topic

This example is a basic troubleshooting topic.

Scenario

Name Tripped circuit breaker

Description The system is plugged in, the power switch is on, but the system will not start. This problem is external to

the system, and it is almost always due to a tripped circuit breaker. The system is a low-power consumer

product that runs on household electricity.

Discussion

We will use a troubleshooting topic with a single <troubleSolution> element to document the corrective action for this problem.

Output

Before looking at the tag view, look at the output first:

System will not turn on

Everything looks right, but the system still does not start.

Condition

The system is plugged in, the power switch is on, but the system will not start.

Cause

This problem is usually due to power not being supplied to the system through the electrical outlet. Often, a circuit breaker has been tripped so that no power is available at the outlet.

Remedy



Warning:

If you do not know how to reset circuit breakers, do not attempt to fix this problem. Instead, find somebody who is qualified to do this for you.

- Turn the system power switch to OFF.
- 2. Reset the breaker.
- 3. Turn the system power switch to ON.

The system turns on.

Tag view

Collectively, the following series of XML editor screen-shots form a complete troubleshooting topic. They have been split into several segments for formatting reasons. Please notice the XML comments embedded within the topic markup because they contain usage advice. #comment This is an XML comment #comment

troubleshooting #comment

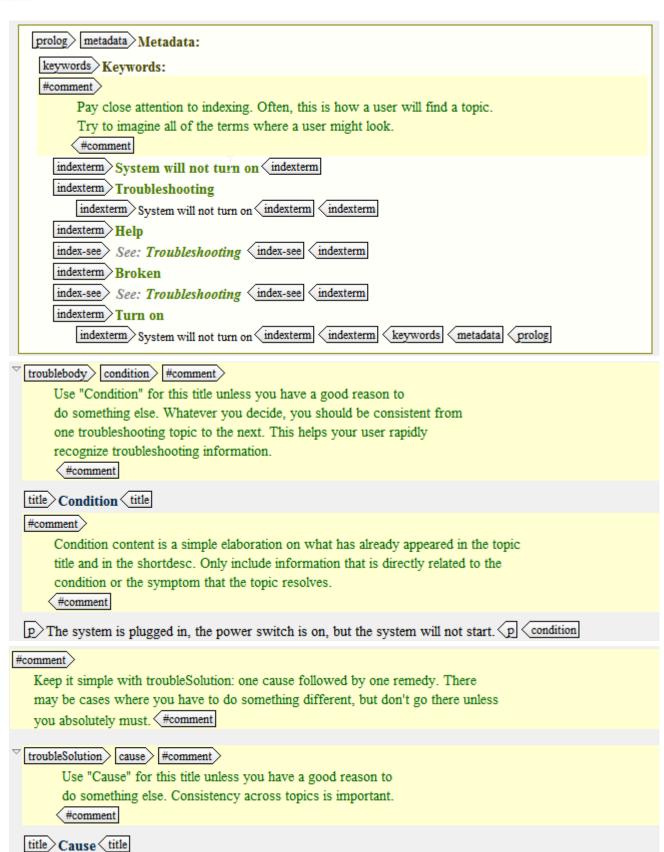
The topic title describes the problem from a user's point of view. The title should refer to a problem's symptoms rather than to its causes.

#comment

title System will not turn on title

shortdesc Short Description: Everything looks right, but the system still does not start. shortdesc





#comment Cause content should only describe the problem origins that are fixed by the cause's companion remedy element. #comment P> This problem is usually due to power not being supplied to the system through the electrical outlet. Often, a circuit breaker has been tripped so that no power is available at the outlet. p cause title Remedy title #comment > The responsibleParty is the role of the person performing the remedy. This element is optional. Often, stylesheets will use this content as metadata and not output it directly. Do not use this element unless your stylesheets support it and you have a specific purpose in mind for using it. #comment responsibleParty electrician responsibleParty #comment > The use of steps at this point in remedy is one of three mutually exclusive choices. Alternatively, you could use steps-unordered or steps-informal, but do that only if you have a good reason. Again, it important to maintain as much consistency as posible across troubleshooting topics. #comment steps | stepsection | note | Warning: p If you do not know how to reset circuit breakers, do not attempt to fix this problem. Instead, find somebody who is qualified to do this for you. p onte stepsection #comment Often, identical steps appear elsewhere in tasks or in other troubleshooting topics. When this happens consider using conref. \(\psi \) comment step Step 1 cmd Turn the system power switch to uicontrol OFF vicontrol cmd step Step 2 cmd Reset the breaker. cmd step step Step 3 cmd Turn the system power switch to uicontrol ON uicontrol cmd stepresult Step Result:

p The system turns on p stepresult step

steps remedy troubleSolution troublebody troubleshooting



Multiple solutions troubleshooting topic

This example is a troubleshooting topic with multiple remedies.

Scenario

Name Cannot log into the system.

Description A customer cannot log into the system. The reasons for this could be: no account exists, the user forgot

their user id, or the user forgot their password. The user needs to contact support if none of the remedies

resolve this problem.

Discussion

We will use a troubleshooting topic with three <troubleSolution> elements to present a series of potential fixes (fallbacks) for this problem. The idea is that the user will try each <troubleSolution> until the problem is resolved. The first title in each <troubleSolution> is in the <cause> element, and it briefly describes the cause instead of using a consistent title such as "Cause." In multiple <troubleSolution> scenarios, descriptive labeling helps users diagnose problems quicker. Therefore, a title that connotes the cause is more important than using a uniform title such as "Cause."

No <condition> element is used here. That is because all pertinent information about the condition has already been given in the topic title and in the shortdesc.

The first <troubleSolution> contains the "no account exists" cause/remedy. This <troubleSolution> must be first because there is no point in a user trying to reset account credentials for a non-existing account. The second <troubleSolution> contains the "forgotten user id/forgotten password" cause/remedy. The third <troubleSolution> contains the final fallback: calling customer support. In practical applications, this third <troubleSolution> would be reused through conref.

Output

Cannot log into the system

The system rejects a user ID or user password.

No account exists

The system requires each user to have an account to access the system.

Remedy

- 1. Have your customer order number available.
- 2. Go to https://nnn.nnn.nnn/IneedAnewAccount.jsp to set up a new account.

Forgotten user ID or forgotten password

Forgotten user IDs and forgotten passwords can be reset over the internet.

Remedy

Go to https://nnn.nnn/FixMyCredentials.jsp to retrieve your user ID or to reset your password.

Contact support

There must be some other cause for this problem.

Remedy

- 1. Have your customer order number available.
- Call customer support at 1-800-555-1234.

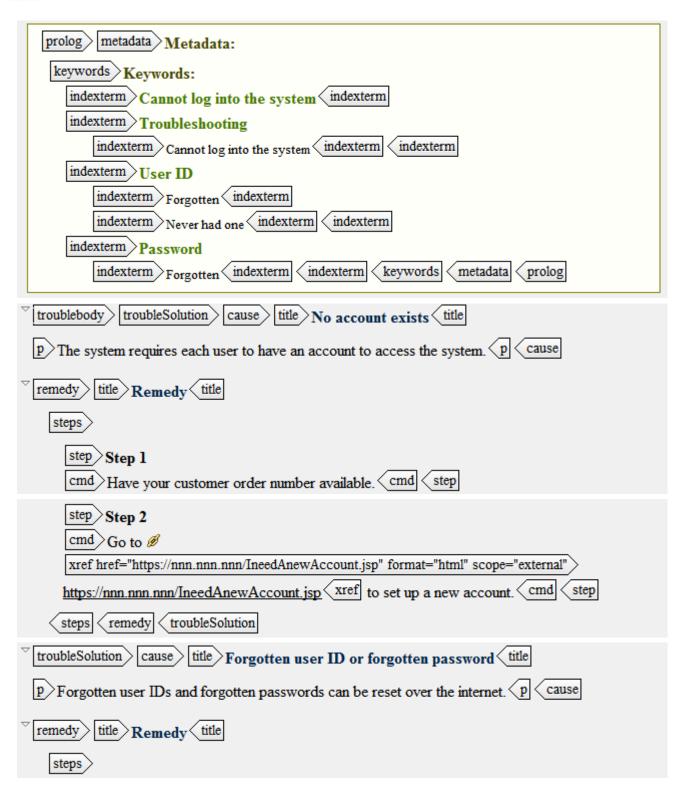
Tag view

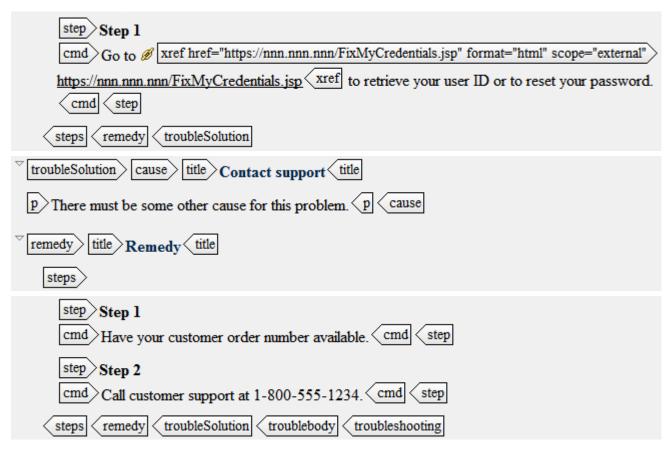
troubleshooting id="CannotLogIn" outputclass="worksheet"

title Cannot log into the system title

shortdesc Short Description: The system rejects a user ID or user password. shortdesc







Managing complexity

Some troubleshooting information is inherently complex.

Complexity

Software products are often complex. Fortunately, when things go wrong within a product, good software engineering shields users from most of this complexity. But, in some cases, there simply is not enough development budget to cover every eventuality with code. Unfortunately, if the code does not supply the intellegence for recovering from a problem, the responsibility falls to the product documentation. Failing that, the responsibility cedes to technical support. And finally, failing that, the responsibility lands upon the user or upon a user community. For our purposes, we assume that the product documentation has accepted responsibility.

Resolving complex problems

Regardless of complexity, the basics of the troubleshooting information type are still valid: condition, cause, remedy. However, complexity manifests itself almost immediately. Typically, the condition the product reports is too general, making it unlikely that the user will be able to immediately identify the actual cause. This becomes problematic in troubleshooting scenarios where the user cannot simply try one remedy after the next. For some products, that method is too disruptive, and it may be unsafe. The cure for this is to use diagnostic steps to further explore the condition until it points to a single cause. Once the cause has been isolated, its corresponding remedy can be followed.



The troubleshooting topic and complexity

The best practice for complex scenarios is to use the first <troubleSolution> element in a troubleshooting topic to help users determine a specific cause. Subsequent <troubleSolution> elements contain a description and a remedy for each cause identified in the first <troubleSolution>.

Complex scenario

This example is a complex troubleshooting topic.

Scenario

Name Rare alarm

Description A fiber-optic switching system can issue any of 49 separate digital transmission alarms. 42 of these alarms are somewhat likely to happen during normal operation. Consequently, the software architecture contains logic to evaluate several system state variables and so that it can report a specific cause to the user along with the alarm code. But, the likelihood of the remaining 10 alrams occurring is small enough that the software architecture does little more than issue an alarm. Consequently, the system alarm manual must incorporate diagnostic steps into the troubleshooting topics for each those 10 alarms.

> This scenario is about documenting the EJOL (Excessive Jitter On Line) alarm—one of the 10 rare alarms. The EJOL alarm can occur due to: trouble on the far-end system, excessive line noise, or a faulty LN243 circuit pack.

Discussion

This solution uses two conventions. First, it uses a <dl> element inside of the <condition> element to present alarm classification information. Second, this solution devotes the first <troubleSolution> element soley to identifying the alarm's cause. Details have been omitted from the remaining <troubleSolution> elements because they are not important for understanding how to organize complex troubleshooting information.

Output

EJOL - excessive jitter on line

The system has experienced an "excessive jitter on line" alarm

Alarm classification

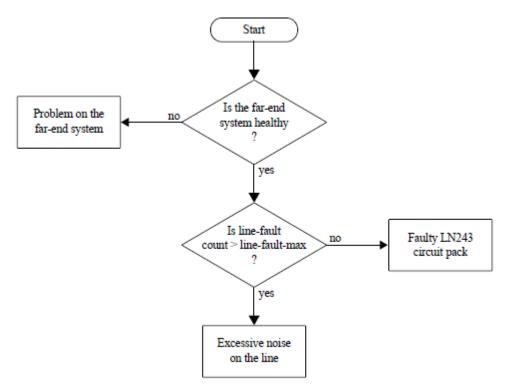
Minor Category

Impact Service is degraded

This alarm should be retired within 24 hours Urgency

Determine the cause

The EJOL alarm can occur due to: trouble on the far-end system, excessive line noise, or a faulty LN243 circuit pack. Here is a flowchart that shows the process for diagnosing the cause.



Steps

- Query the far-end system's state of health.
 - If the far-end is not healthy, go to Far-end not healthy (see page 29)
- 2. Retrieve the line-fault count from Operations > Performance > Line
- 3. Retrieve the line-fault-max value from Administration > Transmission > Settings
- 4. Compare the line-fault count to the line-fault-max value.
 - If the line-fault count is greater than or equal to the line-fault-max value, go to Excessive line noise (see page 29)
 - . If the line-fault count is less than the line-fault-max value, go to Faulty LN243 circuit pack (see page 29)

Far-end not healthy

...

Remedy

1. ...

2. ...

Excessive line noise

...

1. ...

2. ...



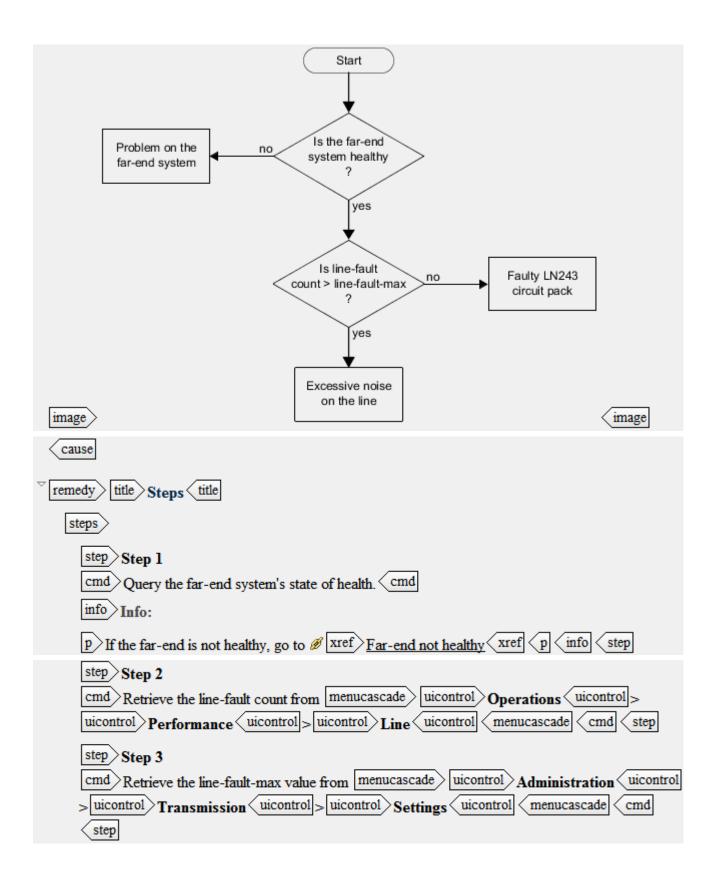
Faulty LN243 circuit pack

...

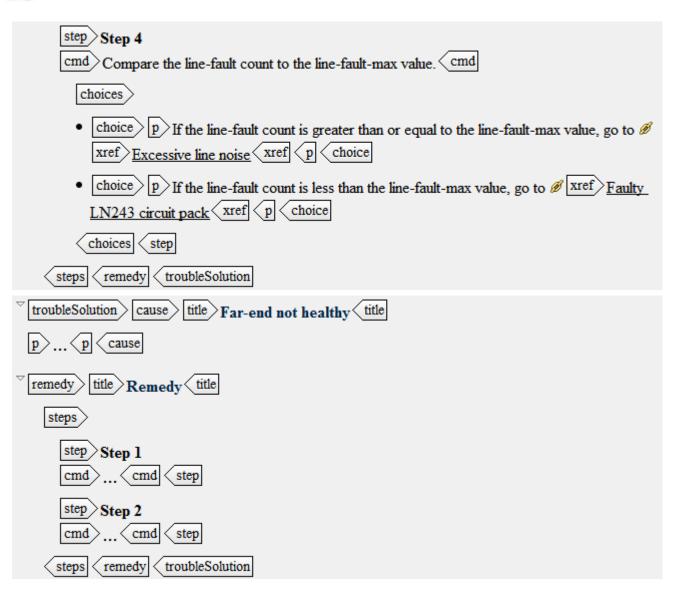
1. ... 2. ...

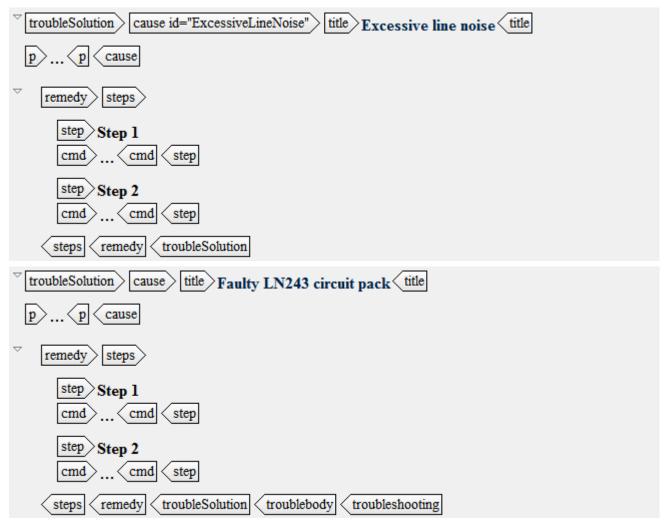
Tag view

troubleshooting) title EJOL - excessive jitter on line title shortdesc Short Description: The system has experienced an " excessive jitter on line q alarm shortdesc metadata Metadata: prolog > keywords > Keywords: indexterm EJOL indexterm indexterm > Alarms indexterm > EJOL < indexterm indexterm Excessive jitter < indexterm indexterm > Jitter < indexterm indexterm keywords metadata troublebody condition title Alarm classification title dlentry dt Category dt dd p Minor p dd dlentry dlentry dt Impact dt dd p Service is degraded p dd dlentry dlentry dt Urgency dt dd p This alarm should be retired within 24 hours p dd dlentry condition troubleSolution cause title Determine the cause title P The EJOL alarm can occur due to: trouble on the far-end system, excessive line noise, or a faulty LN243 circuit pack. Here is a flowchart that shows the process for diagnosing the cause. \(\frac{p}{} \)









Embedded troubleshooting examples

Task-related

This section contains examples showing streptroubleshooting and tasktroubleshooting.

Discussion

The steptroubleshooting and tasktroubleshooting elements were designed to give users immediate, brief information about how to resolve problems when an undesirable result happens. This means writers should limit content to discussing condition, cause, and then perhaps a single step. If lists containing instructions are present in the content, that is too much. The writer should re-design the content so that the instructions are in a separate troubleshooting topic, and then refer the user to that topic.

Failure to locate troubleshooting information is a key reason that users abandon a task. In the examples that follow, pay particular attention to the icon and the "Trouble?" label that appear in the output. The stylesheets automatically inserted both the icon graphic and the "Trouble?" label. Having the icon and a generated label in the output helps users immediately locate troubleshooting information, increasing the chances that users who encounter difficulties will resolve them.



Task troubleshooting example

Scenario

Name Web site update fails

Description A customer follows the steps in a task for updating web site content, but the web site is not showing the

new content. This could be due to a stale web server cache. The customer should restart the web server.

Output

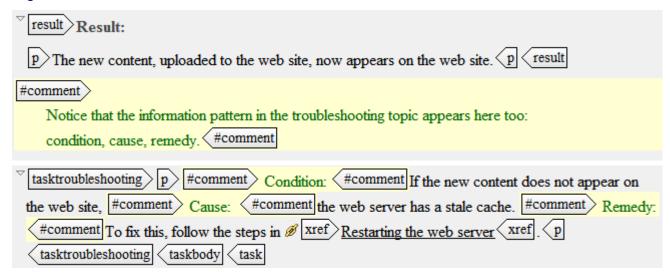
The new content, uploaded to the web site, now appears on the web site.



Trouble?

If the new content does not appear on the web site, the web server has a stale cache. To fix this, follow the steps in Restarting the web server.

Tag view



Step troubleshooting example

Scenario

Name Wrong option in step

Description A user has to select one of two system configuration settings in a step. If they select the wrong one, an error

message displays. To recover, they need to click the **Back** button and select the other configuration setting.

Output

- Select one of the system configuration settings:
 - Stand-alone system
 - Networked system

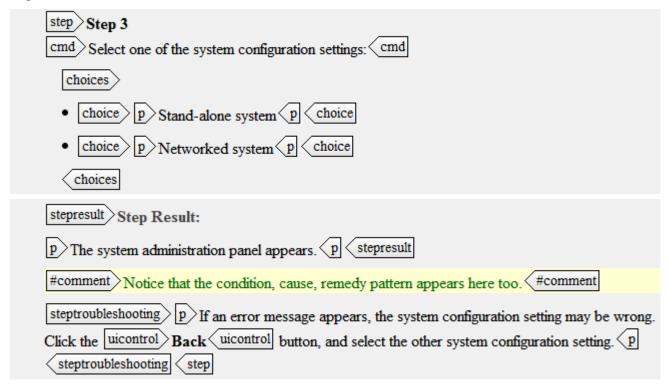
The system administration panel appears.



Trouble?

If an error message appears, the system configuration setting may be wrong. Click the Back button, and select the other system configuration setting.

Tag view



Troubleshooting note-type

Scenario

Name Cannot see all menu items

Description By default, a software product hides certain advanced menu items, however the product's documentation describes all of menus items. Customers following the documentation along on their systems have become confused when they did not see all of the menu items that were being described. The fix for this is to have the customer change their preferences to "Show Full Menus".



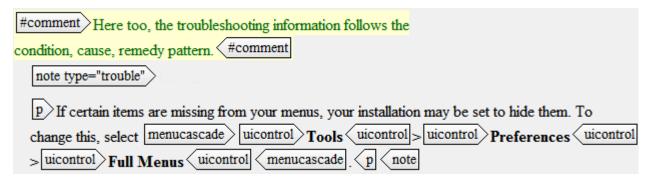
Output



Trouble?

If certain items are missing from your menus, your installation may be set to hide them. To change this, select Tools > Preferences > Full Menus.

Tag view



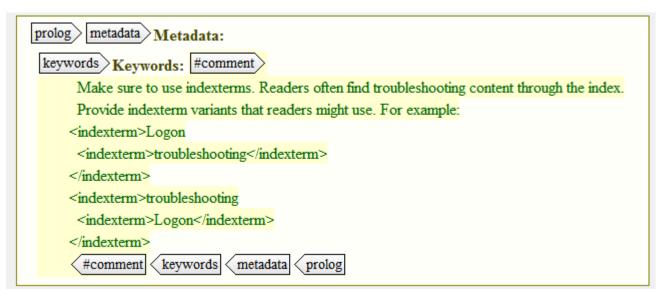
Annotated troubleshooting template

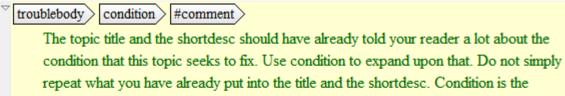
This is a DITA troubleshooting topic template with usage comments.

XML comments describe each element and how to use it. Formal descriptions for each troubleshooting element can be found in the *Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) Version 1.3 OASIS Standard* Language Specification section.

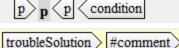
Tag view





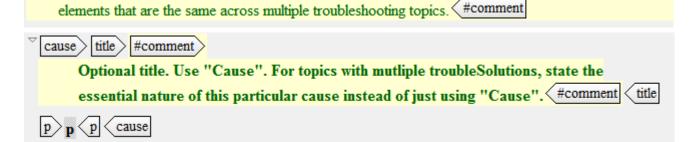


their relationships with each other are complex, you can discuss that here. #comment
title #comment Optional title. Use "Condition". #comment title

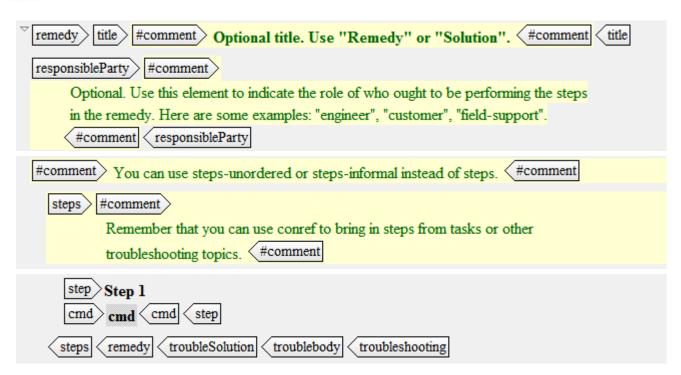


troubleSolution is meant to hold pairs of cause and remedy. Occassionally, you might have cause without remedy or remedy without cause, but that should be rare. Be sure to order mutliple troubleSolution elements in a sequence that makes sense. For example, order them by the likelihood of a cause occuring. You may wish to deviate from that if a remedy for a less likely cause is much easier to try. Remember to use conref for troubleSolution

appropriate place to put impact and severity information. If multiple solutions exist and







XML view

Here is the template's XML. It can be copied and pasted into an XML editor.

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="utf-8"?>
<!DOCTYPE troubleshooting
PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Troubleshooting//EN"
 "troubleshooting.dtd">
<troubleshooting id="REPLACE_THIS">
 <title><!-- State the essential nature of the problem --></title>
 <shortdesc><!-- Be more specific about the problem here --></shortdesc>
 prolog>
  <metadata>
   <keywords><!--
      Make sure to use indexterms. Readers often find troubleshooting content through the index.
      Provide indexterm variants that readers might use. For example:
     <indexterm>Logon
      <indexterm>troubleshooting</indexterm>
     </indexterm>
     <indexterm>troubleshooting
      <indexterm>Logon</indexterm>
     </indexterm>
   </keywords>
  </metadata>
 </prolog>
 <troublebody>
  <condition><!--
     The topic title and the shortdesc should have already told your reader a lot about the
    condition that this topic seeks to fix. Use condition to expand upon that. Do not simply
     repeat what you have already put into the title and the shortdesc. Condition is the
     appropriate place to put impact and severity information. If multiple solutions exist and
    their relationships with each other are complex, you can discuss that here.-->
   <title><!-- Optional title. Use "Condition". --></title>
   </condition>
  <troubleSolution><!--
     troubleSolution is meant to hold pairs of cause and remedy. Occassionally, you might have
     cause without remedy or remedy without cause, but that should be rare. Be sure to order
    mutliple troubleSolution elements in a sequence that makes sense. For example, order them
    by the likelihood of a cause occuring. You may wish to deviate from that if a remedy for a less likely cause is much easier to try. Remember to use conref for troubleSolution
    elements that are the same across multiple troubleshooting topics.-->
    <cause>
     <title><!--
      Optional title. Use "Cause". For topics with mutliple troubleSolutions, state the
      essential nature of this particular cause instead of just using "Cause".-->
     </title>
     </cause>
   <remedy>
     <title><!-- Optional title. Use "Remedy" or "Solution". -->
     </title>
     <responsibleParty><!--
      Optional. Use this element to indicate the role of who ought to be performing the steps
      in the remedy. Here are some examples: "engineer", "customer", "field-support".
     </responsibleParty>
     <!-- You can use steps-unordered or steps-informal instead of steps. -->
     <steps>
      <!-
         Remember that you can use conref to bring in steps from tasks or other
         troubleshooting topics. -->
      <step>
       <cmd/>
      </step>
     </steps>
   </remedy>
  </troubleSolution>
 </troublebody>
</troubleshooting>
```