I had quite a lot to say. One thing that I believe also belongs in article is a discussion about how effective short descriptions cannot be written unless the topic satisfies these prerequisites:

* Limits itself to a well defined scope
* Has an effective title that connotes the salient purpose of the topic

| Original content | Comments |
| --- | --- |
| **Why Short Descriptions are a Good Idea** | *None* |
| The <shortdesc> element is common to all DITA topic types, and it is the first piece of body content within a topic. It is not mandatory, and you still have a valid DITA topic if you omit it. A lot of content creators do exactly that, but if you don't use short descriptions or write suitably descriptive content for it you are doing your readers a disservice. And while writing text for the short description is easy, writing a good short description for a topic is hard. This article focuses on the benefits of using short descriptions and best practices that can not only help your readers find the content they are looking for, but can also help you write better topics and aid with content reuse. | The <shortdesc> element is common to all DITA topic types, and it appears near the beginning of a topic. Because short description is not mandatory a lot of content creators omit it. Unfortunately, they could be doing their readers a disservice. ~~And while writing text for the short description is easy, writing a good short description for a topic is hard.~~ This article discusses the benefits of using short descriptions and presents best practices for creating them. |
| *Not in the original content* | **What is a short description?** |
| *Moved from Why Use Short Descriptions?:* Content within a short description is usually one or two sentences long, occurring between the topic title and the topic body. It is the initial paragraph-like content for a topic. Your editors will tell you to keep it short, because it is supposed to be a short description of the topic it is introducing. So it serves as a summary of what is contained in the topic, and ought to give the reader an idea not only about what it contains, but why it is relevant to their needs. | A short description is an adjunct to a topic title that helps readers further understand a topic's purpose and why it might be of interest. A short description is usually one or two sentences long, and it immediately follows the topic title. ~~It is the initial paragraph-like content for a topic. Your editors will tell you to keep it short, because it is supposed to be a short description of the topic it is introducing. So it serves as a summary of what is contained in the topic, and ought to give the reader an idea not only about what it contains, but why it is relevant to their needs.~~ |
| **Why Use Short Descriptions?** | *None* |
| Why use it? Short descriptions helps readers find the information they are looking for more easily, and can help content creators write better content. It aids with Search Engine Optimization (SEO), often appearing as "hover text" for topic links within Context Sensitive Help, and is displayed alongside topic links within a relationship table. It also serves content creators as a "statement of intent" for what a topic should hold or ought to cover. | ~~Why use it?~~ Short descriptions help~~s~~ readers find ~~the~~ information ~~they are looking for more easily~~, ~~and can help content creators write better content~~. Short descriptions have the following benefits:* Improves Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
* Appears as "hover text" for topic links within Context Sensitive Help
* Displays alongside topic links within a relationship table
* Serves as a "statement of intent" for what a topic covers.
 |
|  As a colleague of ours, Don Day, once wrote "...of all the DITA elements, shortdesc is most like a credit card with a loyalty program that rewards you for using it." Well-written short descriptions aid users to find the content they are looking for, and can act as a guide for content creators when writing topic-based content. The more you use it, the better your DITA content will be. | As a colleague of ours, Don Day, once wrote "...of all the DITA elements, shortdesc is most like a credit card with a loyalty program that rewards you for using it." Well-written short descriptions help users ~~to~~ find the content they are looking for~~,~~ and can act as a guide for content creators when writing topic-based content. The more you use it, the better your DITA content will be. |
| **Short Descriptions Make Content "Easier" for Readers** | *None* |
| In Developing Quality Technical Information, the authors identify the characteristics that quality information shares. Good information should be:* Easy to use
* Easy to understand
* Easy to find.

If a reader can't find information they need to use product, they can become frustrated. Frustrated readers become disenchanted users, and that leads to poor reviews of your content and the product or brand associated with it. To make your content easier for readers to use, understand and to find, content creators need to take the time to craft a suitable short description for each topic. Effective short descriptions are an opportunity to help users easily find the correct information for which they are looking. Satisfied documentation users lead to satisfied product users. Satisfied product users lead to good product reviews. Good product reviews lead to improved sales. It is clearly worth the time and effort to write effective short descriptions. | In Developing Quality Technical Information, the authors identify the characteristics that quality information shares. Good information should be:* Easy to use
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If a reader can't find information they need to use a product, they can become frustrated. Frustrated readers become disenchanted users, and that leads to poor reviews of your content and the product or brand associated with it. To make your content easier for readers to use, understand and to find, content creators need to take the time to craft a suitable short description for each topic. Effective short descriptions are an opportunity to help users easily find the correct information for which they are looking. Satisfied documentation users lead to satisfied product users. Satisfied product users lead to good product reviews. Good product reviews lead to improved sales. It is clearly worth the time and effort to write effective short descriptions. |
| **Telling Readers Why they Should Read Your Topic** | *None* |
| Since it is the first paragraph of a topic, a well-written short description tells the reader if it contains the information they are looking for. A short description ought to contain keywords that will help the reader identify whether the topic contains useful information. It should also be a concise description of the topic. | Since the short description becomes the first paragraph when a topic is output, a well-written short description tells the reader if it contains the information they are looking for. A short description ought to contain keywords that ~~will~~ help the reader identify whether the topic contains useful information. It should also be a concise description of the topic. |
| Here's an example of a bad short description for a topic called "Introduction to Bird Calling" in the documentation for the Acme Bird Feeder: | *None* |
| The following topic contains instructions on how to master bird calling. | *None* |
| After reading the topic, the reader thinks "Why should I care about bird calling? All I want to do is feed the birds." So the content creators ought to re-write the short description to provide more context for the reader. | After reading that short description, a reader might ignore the topic thinking: "Why would I care about bird calling? All I want to do is feed the birds." So the content creators ought to re-write the short description to provide more context for the reader. |
| If you wish to attract more birds to your Acme Bird Feeder, learn the art of bird calling. Bird calling is an efficient way to alert more birds to the presence of your bird feeder. | *None* |
| "Ah," says the reader. "This topic will ensure that that I alert the birds that dinner is served! I'm getting the most bang for the bucks I put out for this bird feeder. The Acme Corporation has earned my loyalty!" | After reading this new short description, a reader might think: "This topic will ensure that that I alert the birds that dinner is served! I'm going to get great results with this bird feeder. The Acme Corporation has earned my loyalty!" |
| **Short Descriptions as Preview Links in Online Documents** | *None* |
| If you have topics nested in your main topic, those topic titles are are automatically generated as links at the end of the main topic. (In DITA, the main topic is listed as the parent topic and the nested topics are the child topics). Under the topic title is the text in the <shortdesc> element. | *None* |
| A link to the parent topic is also automatically generated at the end of the child topic. The short description, however, is not listed under the link. But, you can hover your cursor over the link and the short description is displayed. This is also the case for relationship table links. | *None* |
| **Good Short Descriptions = Better Search Engine Results for Online****Documents** | *None* |
| Short descriptions appear in search engine results. So, well written short descriptions lets the searcher know that the information required is in your document. If you put key terms in your short description, your ranking in search results will be improved. A document with well-written short descriptions has a better chance to turning up in search results than documents without them. | Short descriptions appear in search engine results. So, well written short descriptions lets a search engine know that the information it seeks is in your document. Putting key terms in your short description improve your ranking in search results ~~will be improved~~. A document with well-written short descriptions has a better chance of turning up in search results than a document~~s~~ without them. |
| **Short Descriptions Can Help Content Creators Find Content for Reuse** | *None* |
| One of the chief benefits of DITA to content creators is being able to reuse existing content effectively. Effective short descriptions can aid content creators find existing content to use in their own document. Depending on the content repository or Content Management System you are using, when searching for content not only the title for a topic is displayed, but also the short description. | One of the chief benefits of DITA to content creators is being able to reuse existing content effectively. Effective short descriptions can help content creators find existing content to use in their own document. Enhanced search capabilities in some content repositories or content management systems may return short descriptions along with topic titles. |
| For example, there might be a myriad of "Introduction"-type topics within the system, but a good short description can help a content creator seeking a specific Introduction topic. Let's say a content creator is looking for a specific Introductory topic on their company's Widget product, and they run across the following titled topics while searching their topic repository: | For example, suppose that a content creator is looking for a specific Introductory topic about their company's Widget product, and they run across the following titled topics while searching their topic repository: |
| * Introduction to Widgets
* Widgets: An Introduction to the Product
* Widgets and You: An Introduction to Using Widgets Effectively
 | *None* |
| Which "Introduction" topic should the content creator use (if any)? Effective short descriptions not only help readers, but other content creators find the right material for content reuse. Consider the same search results followed by their respective short descriptions: | Would one of those topics be appropriate? Effective short descriptions not only help readers, but other content creators find the right material for content reuse. Consider the same search results accompanied by their respective short descriptions: |
| * Introduction to Widgets | An overview of Widgets and how they can be used in a retail setting along with the Vebulon 2000 when working directly with customers.
* Widgets: An Introduction to the Product | What Widgets are designed for and possible scenarios for use, including retail, B2B and underwater scenarios.
* Widgets and You: An Introduction to Using Widgets Effectively | Information on using Widgets in a salt-water, aquatic environment. Comes with useful tips on its underwater navigation and shark repellant features.
 | * Introduction to Widgets | An overview of Widgets and how they can be used in a retail setting along with the Vebulon 2000 when working directly with customers.
* Widgets: An Introduction to the2:00 pm on Wednesday is good for me; I am assuming this will be at FCC? I am happy to drop the language into a form for execution once I have your and Bob’s feedback/confirmation on the terms. Product | What Widgets are designed for and possible scenarios for use, including retail, B2B and underwater scenarios.
* *Widgets and You: An Introduction to Using Widgets Effectively | Information on using Widgets in a salt-water, aquatic environment. Comes with useful tips on its underwater navigation and shark repellent features.*
 |
| A content creator looking over these detailed short descriptions will have a much easier time determining which Widget Introduction topic (if any) is pertinent to include in their work. | A content creator looking over these results would have a much easier time determining which Widget Introduction topic (if any) is pertinent to include in their work. |
| **Short Description Best Practices** | *None* |
| Keep the following best practices in mind when writing your short descriptions:* Include short descriptions consistently throughout all of your topics
* For task topics, tell users what they can accomplish when they read your topic
* For concept topics, tell users about what you are describing and why they should care
* For reference topics, tell users when the referenced item does or what it can be used for
* For glossary topics, inform users why this glossary is useful to them
* For troubleshooting topics, describe the symptoms of a problem they are likely to encounter and inform them that
* this topic can help them solve that problem
* Do not use cross-references in your short descriptions
* Resist the temptation to copy the first sentence or paragraph into a converted topic.
 | Keep the following best practices in mind when writing your short descriptions:* Include short descriptions consistently throughout all of your topics
* For task topics, tell users what they can accomplish when they read your topic
* For concept topics, tell users about what you are describing and why they should care
* For reference topics, tell users what the referenced item does or what it can be used for
* ~~For glossary topics, inform users why this glossary is useful to them~~

*Calling a topic that introduces a Glossary a “glossary topic” confused me because I immediately equate “glossary topic” with the glossentry doctype. It wasn't until I read the complete section on this that it became clear to me what was being discussed. I crossed this item out because I don't think that it is any more remarkable than any other shortdesc for a concept topic. Consequently, I think that you should remove it and avoid the potential for confusion.** For troubleshooting topics, describe the symptoms of a problem they are likely to encounter and inform them that
* this topic can help them solve that problem
* Do not use cross-references in your short descriptions
* When converting legacy content to DITA, resist the temptation to copy the first sentence or paragraph into a converted topic.
 |
| **Use Short Descriptions Consistently** | *None* |
| The <shortdesc> element isn't mandatory. But if you want quality DITA-based documentation it should be mandatory. If you have topics nested in your main topic, those topic titles are are automatically generated as links at the end of the main topic. (In DITA, the main topic is listed as the parent topic and the nested topics are the child topics.) Under the topic title is the text in the <shortdesc> element. If you use short descriptions in some topics and not in others, the previews for child topic links will appear incongruous. And your readers could lose confidence in your document. | *I disagree about shortdesc being mandatory. The shortdesc must connote something of significance beyond what's already connoted by the title. It must not be a simple reformulation of the title. If the title fully connotes what a topic is about, then the shortdesc is redunant, and it ought to be omitted. It must never be a contrivance to satisfy a rigid style guideline. In most cases it should be possible to create a shortdesc that adds value, but not in all cases. The minor inconsistencies resulting from omitting such short descriptions is better than furnishing redundant or irrelevant content.* |
| **How to Write Short Descriptions for Task Topics** | *None* |
| A task topic is intended for a procedure that describes how to accomplish a task. A task topic lists a series of steps that users follow to produce an intended outcome. So a short description for a task topic should explain to the reader the purpose of the task. It can be helpful for a user to know why a task should (or must) be performed. For example, the following sentence doesn't explain why you would want to configure security settings: | A task topic ~~is intended for a procedure that~~ describes how to do something. A task topic lists a series of steps that users follow to produce an intended outcome. So a short description for a task topic should explain to the reader the purpose of the task. It can be helpful for a user to know why a task should (or must) be performed. For example, the following sentence doesn't explain why you would want to configure security settings: |
| Use this procedure to configure security settings for the ABC product. | *None* |
| Perhaps it is obvious to you, but don't take that for granted. The following sentence is an effective rewrite: | *None* |
| Security settings determine who can and cannot use the ABC product. | *None* |
| When you understand the benefits of the task writing, the short description is easier. | Understanding the benefits of a task makes writing a short description for it easier. |
| **How to Write Short Descriptions for Concept Topics** | *None* |
| A concept topic is more objective, containing definitions, rules, and guidelines. So a short description for a concept topic should answer the questions "What is the concept and why should users care?" Therefore, you will want to clearly define the concept, which could be a feature, technology, or tool. Explain also why users should understand this information. The following is a poor short description for a concept topic: | A concept topic describes the nature of something.2:00 pm on Wednesday is good for me; I am assuming this will be at FCC? I am happy to drop the language into a form for execution once I have your and Bob’s feedback/confirmation on the terms. So, a short description for a concept topic should answer the questions "What is the concept and why should users care?" Therefore, you will want to clearly define the concept, which could be a feature, technology, or tool. Explain also why users should understand this information. The following is a poor short description for a concept topic: |
| This topic covers fuel filters. | *None* |
| Why should the user read about fuel filters? What are fuel filters? Are fuel filters important to me? The following rewrite explains all of that: | *None* |
| Fuel injector units require cleaner fuel. Fuel filters screen out dirt and rust particles from the fuel. | ~~Fuel injector units require cleaner fuel.~~ Fuel filters screen out dirt and rust particles from the fuel providing fuel injector units with cleaner fuel. |
| **How to Write Short Descriptions for Reference Topics** | *None* |
| A reference topic describes command syntax, programming instructions, and other reference material, and usually contains detailed, factual material. Short descriptions for reference topics should explain what an object does, how it works, and why is it useful. | A reference topic describes command syntax, programming instructions, and other reference material, and usually contains detailed, factual material. Short descriptions for reference topics should explain what an object does~~, how it works,~~ and why is it useful.*“how it works” is conceptual.* |
| The chdir command is used in directories | *None* |
| OK. How is it used? Why is it used? The following short description answers that and more. | No consider the following. What does it do? Why is it used? The following short description answers that and more.*How something is used is more concept that it is reference.* |
| Displays the name of the current directory or changes the current folder. Used with only a drive letter (for example, chdir C:), chdir displays the names of the current drive and folder. Used without parameters, chdir displays the current drive and directory. | The chdir command changes the context to a different directory.*The original is too lengthy and too complicated for a short description.* |
| **How to Write Short Descriptions for Glossary Topics**A glossary topic contains a list of definitions, typically in alphabetical order. It references the terms that are used within a document and describes what they are.A poor short description for a glossary topic would simply say what it is. Like the following example:The following glossary describes the terms that are used throughout this manual.This defines what a glossary is, but that is about it. But why should a user read it? The following rewrite is a better example:This glossary provides a solid grounding in all of the terms and acronyms used in this document. For those new to the product or to the intricacies of quantum entanglement, this material will help you to better understand how the Acme Teleporter works. | *This topic should be removed because there is no “glossary” information type that corresponds with it. DITA only defines only glossentry, and it has no shortdesc element available. The example as given would be marked up as a concept. Additionally, the short description itself seems contrived because I don't know of any readers who aren't fully aware of what a glossary is and why they might want to use it.* |
| **How to Write Short Descriptions for Troubleshooting Topics** | *None* |
| The new Troubleshooting topic type--introduced in the DITA 1.3 specification--is designed to allow content creators to focus on addressing and solving specific problems users might encounter. The troubleshooting topic type is defined by addressing a particular problem that is likely to arise (the "cause") and then describing how the problem can be fixed (the "remedy"). It might seem like the benefits of having a troubleshooting topic are obvious, but content creators still need to focus on why the user would find a troubleshooting topic useful, with a particular focus on the scenario where the problem is most likely to arise. | The new Troubleshooting topic type--introduced in the DITA 1.3 specification--allows content creators to focus on addressing and solving specific problems users might encounter. The troubleshooting topic type is defined by addressing a particular problem that is likely to arise (the "condition") and then it describes the likely “cause” and how the problem can be fixed (the "remedy"). It might seem like the benefits of having a troubleshooting topic are obvious, but content creators still need to focus on why the user would find a troubleshooting topic useful, with a particular focus on the scenario where the problem is most likely to arise. |
| The following example illustrates a poor short description for a troubleshooting topic: | Assume that the troubleshooting topic has the following title: “ACME Beartrap closes prematurely.” The following short description is poor because it is too abstract. |
| How to troubleshoot issues with your ACME Beartrap. | *None* |
| This short description simply explains what the troubleshooting topic is about. Instead, focus on the situation that the user is likely to encounter and make it clear what the value of the troubleshooting topic is. | ~~This short description simply explains what the troubleshooting topic is about.~~ Instead, focus on the situation that the user is likely to encounter and make it clear what the value of the troubleshooting topic is. |
| How to safely re-open the ACME Beartrap after it has closed prematurely during setup after a Roadrunner has startled you from behind. Includes important information on how not to fall off a cliff immediately after freeing yourself. | Find out how to safely reset the ACME Beartrap after it closes prematurely.*Condition and cause were munged into the original short description.* |
| ... | *No more comments until the conclusion.* |
| Conclusion | *None* |
| Though <shortdesc> is an optional element, when used effectively it is a useful guide to readers and content creators alike. When done well, short descriptions tell the reader why they might want to read the content of a given topic, and can help content creators decide which topic is appropriate for reuse. | *None* |
| Sadly there are many organizations that are using DITA, but not using short descriptions for their topics, and so are doing themselves and their customers a disservice. Many of those who are using short descriptions are using them to their full advantage and are simply an expanded version of the title for a topic. The examples in this article provide examples of how effective short descriptions are written, and where they can be used in various types of topics and in maps. | ~~Sadly there are many organizations that are using DITA, but not using short descriptions for their topics, and so are doing themselves and their customers a disservice. Many of those who are using short descriptions are using them to their full advantage and are simply an expanded version of the title for a topic.~~ Effective short descriptions help readers find the content that they want faster than they could otherwise. The examples in this article show how effective short descriptions are written and how they can be used in various types of topics and in maps. |