DITA Feature Article
Short Descriptions Shouldn't Be a Tall Order: Writing Effective Short Descriptions

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Contents

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The OASIS DITA Adoption Technical Committee members collaborate to provide expertise and resources to educate the marketplace on the value of the DITA OASIS standard. By raising awareness of the benefits offered by DITA, the DITA Adoption Technical Committee expects the demand for, and availability of, DITA conforming products and services to increase, resulting in a greater choice of tools and platforms and an expanded DITA community of users, suppliers, and consultants.

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Document History

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Why Short Descriptions are a Good Idea

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.

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.

Why use it? Short description 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.

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.

Short Descriptions Make Content "Easier" for Readers

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.

Telling Readers Why they Should Read Your Topic

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.

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:

```
The following topic contains instructions on how to master bird calling.
```

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.

```
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.
```

"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!"

Short Descriptions as Preview Links in Online Documents

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.

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

Good Short Descriptions = Better Search Engine Results for Online Documents

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 Can Help Content Creators Find Content for Reuse

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.

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:

- `Introduction to Widgets`
- `Widgets: An Introduction to the Product`
- `Widgets and You: An Introduction to Using Widgets Effectively`

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:

- `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.

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.

Short Description Best Practices

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
- 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.

Use Short Descriptions Consistently

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.

How to Write Short Descriptions for Task Topics

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:

`Use this procedure to configure security settings for the ABC product.`

Perhaps it is obvious to you, but don't take that for granted. The following sentence is an effective rewrite:

`Security settings determine who can and cannot use the ABC product.`

When you understand the benefits of the task writing, the short description is easier.

How to Write Short Descriptions for Concept Topics

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:

```
This topic covers fuel filters.
```

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:

```
Fuel injector units require cleaner fuel. Fuel filters screen out dirt and
rust particles from the fuel.
```

How to Write Short Descriptions for Reference Topics

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.

```
The chdir command is used in directories
```

OK. How is it used? Why is it used? The following short description answers that and more.

```
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.
```

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.
```

How to Write Short Descriptions for Troubleshooting Topics

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 following example illustrates a poor short description for a troubleshooting topic:

```
How to troubleshoot issues with your ACME Beartrap.
```

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.
```

How to Write Short Descriptions for Maps

Within a map, the <shortdesc> element can be wrapped in a pair of <topicmeta> elements, and within a bookmap <shortdesc> can be inserted within <bookmeta>.

When added to a map, short descriptions have a different behavior than when they are inserted within a topic, as they are supposed to supplant any short descriptions that are present at the topic level. This behavior can be overruled at the topic level if the @copy-to attribute is used, in effect creating a duplicate topic that carries the short description information. This only applies to links rendered at the map level; short descriptions contained within individual topics would be displayed. So, for example, a short description added to a map could be displayed as preview links to individual topics, but those topics would still have their short descriptions displayed at the topic-level, such as when the sole content of a topic is the short description or as links within a relationship table. It can also be used to associate a short description to a non-DITA object—such as a link to an external website—that would otherwise be unable to contain a short description.

Note: Some output processors do not implement the means to produce information from a short description within a map. Before implementing short descriptions with your maps, determine beforehand whether your output generator supports it.

In the case where the short description is designed to override any short description that exists at the topic level, you simply write the short description in the same manner as if it applied to the topic, using the same guidelines set out for each topic type.

The one scenario unique to short descriptions added maps is when they link to non-DITA resources. In this case, use a short description to provide information to the user as to why they might want to view that resource. The following example shows how this could be applied to an external website reference:

```
...
<map>
...
<topicref href="http://www.example.org" scope="external">
  <topicmeta>
    <navtitle>The Example.org website</navtitle>
    <shortdesc>The Example.org website is often used in examples, and its
 domain established specifically to provide an illustrative example of link
 behavior.</shortdesc>
  </topicmeta>
</topicref>
…
</map>
```

Abstract and its Relation to Short Description(s)

The element can incorporate one or more(!) short descriptions within it, and is designed to present its contents as the initial content of a topic. To the reader, content contained within appears as though it is the lead body content to the reader. Adding an abstract is useful when you have a paragraph's worth of content that also contains a description of the topic that would also make for a good short description. This is actually another reason to incorporate useful short descriptions within a topic, as in this context it can do double-duty as a short description as well as pseudo-body content users will read within the topic itself.

Here's an example of an abstract containing a short description within it:

```
...
<concept id="about-twist-it-jnr">
 <title>About Twist-It Jnr.</title>
 <abstract><p>The Twist-It Jnr. can be used to manipulate physical objects in
 the real world remotely. Twist-It Jnr. can be used for easily removing the
 tops off of jars and bottle caps.</p>
  <shortdesc>All of the most likely scenarios for using Twist-it Jnr. are
 covered here, including a few you might never have thought of.</shortdesc>
  <note>Twist-It Jnr. is not designed for flipping actions. For that type of
 functionality please enquire about our Mr. Flip-it product line.</note>
 </abstract>
 <conbody>
  <p>Twist-It Jnr. comes in three colors: coquelicot, smaragdine and atomic
 tangerine.</p>
...
 </conbody>
...
```

In this case the sentence contained within the pair of <shortdesc> elements will be displayed as a link preview for the topic. The full content of the abstract—including the short description—will be visible to the reader when they view the topic, appearing before the first line of body content.

According to the DITA specification can hold multiple instances of <shortdesc>. How this would work at output—in terms of which shortdesc is displayed—likely depends on your setup. It is also worth noting that a short description within an can be overriden by a short description within the map, it does not replace the content contained within <asbtract>.

Do Not Use Cross-references in Your Short Descriptions

"Wait a minute," you say. "I tried to do that, and DITA won't allow it." Yes, that's true. But, there is a fairly simple hack that allows you to include a cross-reference. Why shouldn't you use the hack? Let's go back to the intended use of the <shortdesc> element. To quote the draft DITA 1.3 Specification: "The short description, which represents the purpose or theme of the topic, is also intended to be used as a link preview and for search results." In other words, the short description is a synopsis of the topic. Using a cross-reference to another topic makes no sense. Put the cross-reference somewhere in the text of the topic or in a related topics section.

Converted topics

The previous information helps when you are creating your topics from scratch. But what if you have converted existing documentation from another format to DITA? The temptation is to move the first sentence or paragraph to the <shortdesc> element, or to simply not use the short description at all.

Evaluate your first paragraph. You will likely have to rewrite the first sentence or paragraph to make an effective short description.

Conclusion

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.

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.