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

An OASIS DITA Adoption
Technical Committee Publication

Contents

Why Short Descriptions are a Good Idea.....7
Why Use Short Descriptions?..... 7
Short Descriptions Make Content "Easier" for Readers..... 7
Telling Readers Why They Should Read Your Topic..... 8
How and Where Short Descriptions Appear..... 8
Short Descriptions as the Default Displayed Content..... 9
Good Short Descriptions = Better Search Engine Results for Online Documents..... 9
Short Descriptions Can Help Content Creators Find Content for Reuse..... 10
Short Description Best Practices..... 13
Use Short Descriptions Consistently..... 13
How to Write Short Descriptions for Task Topics..... 13
How to Write Short Descriptions for Concept Topics..... 13
How to Write Short Descriptions for Reference Topics..... 14
How to Write Short Descriptions for Troubleshooting Topics..... 14
How to Write Short Descriptions for Maps..... 14
Abstract and its Relation to Short Description(s)..... 16
Do Not Use Cross-references in Your Short Descriptions..... 17
Converted topics..... 17
Conclusion..... 19

OASIS (Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards) is a not-for-profit, international consortium that drives the development, convergence, and adoption of e-business standards. Members themselves set the OASIS technical agenda, using a lightweight, open process expressly designed to promote industry consensus and unite disparate efforts. The consortium produces open standards for Web services, security, e-business, and standardization efforts in the public sector and for application-specific markets. OASIS was founded in 1993. More information can be found on the OASIS website at http://www.oasis-open.org.

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.

DISCLAIMER: All examples presented in this article were produced using one or more tools chosen at the author's discretion and in no way reflect endorsement of the tools by the OASIS DITA Adoption Technical Committee.

This white paper was produced and approved by the OASIS DITA Adoption Technical Committee as a Committee Draft. It has not been reviewed and/or approved by the OASIS membership at-large.

Copyright © 2015 OASIS. All rights reserved.

All capitalized terms in the following text have the meanings assigned to them in the OASIS Intellectual Property Rights Policy (the "OASIS IPR Policy"). The full Policy may be found at the OASIS website. This document and translations of it may be copied and furnished to others, and derivative works that comment on or otherwise explain it or assist in its implementation may be prepared, copied, published, and distributed, in whole or in part, without restriction of any kind, provided that the above copyright notice and this section are included on all such copies and derivative works. However, this document itself may not be modified in any way, including by removing the copyright notice or references to OASIS, except as needed for the purpose of developing any document or deliverable produced by an OASIS Technical Committee (in which case the rules applicable to copyrights, as set forth in the OASIS IPR Policy, must be followed) or as required to translate it into languages other than English. The limited permissions granted above are perpetual and will not be revoked by OASIS or its successors or assigns. This document and the information contained herein is provided on an "AS IS" basis and OASIS DISCLAIMS ALL WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO ANY WARRANTY THAT THE USE OF THE INFORMATION HEREIN WILL NOT INFRINGE ANY OWNERSHIP RIGHTS OR ANY IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE.

Document History

Revision	Date	Author	Summary
First Draft	3 Aug 2015	Joe Storbeck and Keith Schengili-Roberts	Initial draft
Second Draft	18 Dec 2015	Joe Storbeck and Keith Schengili-Roberts	Incorporating edits from Bob Thomas and Nancy Harrison

Why Short Descriptions are a Good Idea

Introduction to the subject of why the practice of writing short descriptions is a good idea.

The <shortdesc> element is common to all DITA topic types, and it appears after the <title> element at the beginning of a topic. Because short descriptions are not mandatory many content creators omit it. Unfortunately, they could be doing their readers a disservice. This article discusses the benefits of using short descriptions and presents best practices for creating them..

Why Use Short Descriptions?

Provides an overview of the main reasons why short descriptions are useful for content creators using DITA. Summarizes some of the key points that are described in-depth in the rest of the article.

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, and is contained within a pair of <shortdesc> elements. 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.

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*."

Short descriptions help readers find information more easily, and also serve as a guide to content creators who write better targetted content for their readers. Short descriptions have the following benefits:

- Improves Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Appears as "hover text" for topic links within Context Sensitive Help
- Displays its content alongside topic links within a relationship table.
- Serves as a "statement of intent" for what a topic ought to cover.

Effective short descriptions are much harder to write if the topic does not satisfy the following two prerequisites:

- The topic is limited to a well-defined scope
- The topic also has an effective title that connotes the salient purpose of the topic.

In the first instance it is hard to write a short description for a sprawling topic, and in the second a poorly-worded title may appear to conflict with the intent of a short description, confusing the reader.

Short Descriptions Make Content "Easier" for Readers

Examines how effective short descriptions can help readers determine whether a topic is pertinent to their needs. Explains why good short descriptions enhances customers' overall experience of a product.

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 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 they are looking for. 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

Describes how an effective short description provides enough context for a reader to understand what the topic conveys.

A short description ought to contain keywords that 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, a reader might ignore the topic thinking: "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.
```

After reading this new short description, a reader might think: "This topic will ensure 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!"

How and Where Short Descriptions Appear

Describes the circumstances and contexts where short description content may appear in different output types.

Arguably one of the reasons why short descriptions are under-utilized is that it may not be clear to content creators as to where they appear. Depending on the output type, it is possible that a short description will not appear at all, so content creators can be forgiven for thinking that they are unnecessary and nonessential.

Depending on the output format, short descriptions can appear under the following circumstances:

- As description of child pages along with their respective links from the parent page
- The initial content ~~on a displayed page, above any body content~~
- As tooltip descriptions that are displayed when a user hovers their mouse over a link in Context Sensitive Help, or a relationship table on a webpage.

Here is an example of a couple of short descriptions for child webpages appearing on a parent webpage immediately following their respective links:

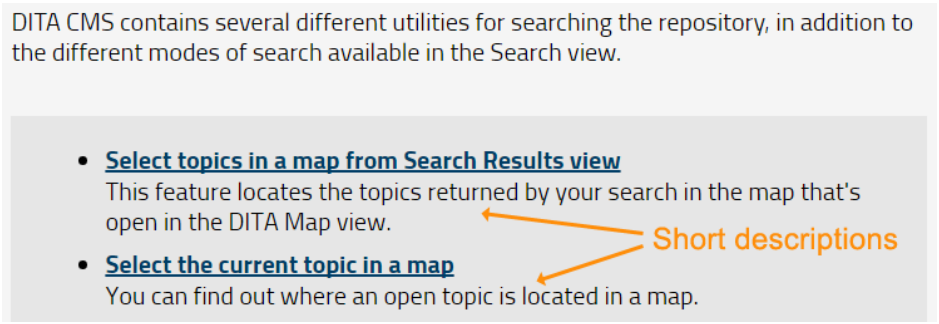

Figure 1: Short descriptions appearing under links on a webpage

And here is an example of how a short description can appear as a tooltip over a topic's link within a relationship table:

Figure 2: A short description appearing as a tooltip as a user hovers over a topic's web link

Depending on the output type and setup, short descriptions may or may not appear above body content within a topic. Here is an example of WebHelp content where the short description for a topic appears by default above the body text:

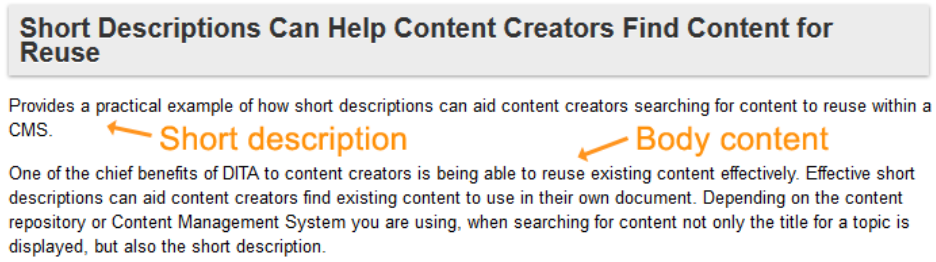

Figure 3: Short description appearing prior to body content within in a topic (WebHelp)

Here is that same topic outputted to PDF, and only the body content appears:

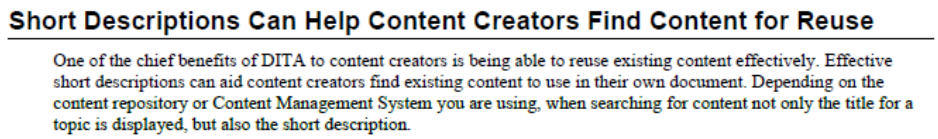

Figure 4: Topic where the short description does not appear prior to body content (PDF)

Note: Whether short descriptions appear in output also depends on the configuration of the transforms being used for that output type.

Short Descriptions as the Default Displayed Content

By default, if there is no body content within a topic, any text within a short description will be displayed instead. This is particularly useful for short topics or those used as the start of sections or chapters.

Good Short Descriptions = Better Search Engine Results for Online Documents

Demonstrates how short descriptions appear within search engine results, and how they can enhance Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Short descriptions appear in search engine results. Well-written short descriptions lets a search engine know that the information it seeks is in your document. When a short description is absent, by default the first sentence or two appears in its place, which rarely summarizes what the content of a topic is about.

Putting key terms in your short description improves your ranking in search results. A document with well-written short descriptions has a better chance of turning up in search results than a document without them.

The following displays an example of a topic being searched for on Google. The short description associated with the topic appears after the link and title of the topic.

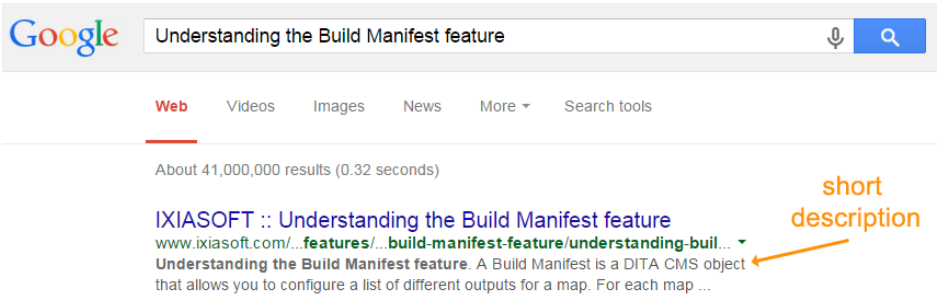

Figure 5: Sample search result in Google displaying short descriptions for a specific DITA topic

Short Descriptions Can Help Content Creators Find Content for Reuse

Provides a practical example of how short descriptions can aid content creators searching for content to reuse within a CMS.

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 can return short descriptions along with topic titles.

The following illustrates how a DITA-capable CMS can display short descriptions alongside topics within a search result:

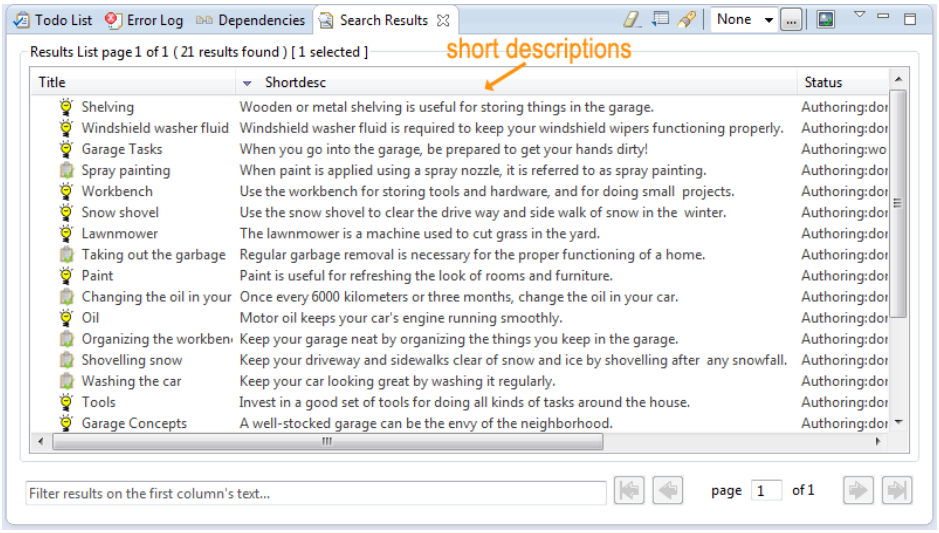

Figure 6: Short descriptions and their associated topic titles in a DITA-capable CMS search dialog

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`

Would one of those topics be appropriate? Effective short descriptions not only help readers, but help 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 repellent features.`

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

An overview of best practices for writing effective short descriptions, including how to write short descriptions for each topic type.

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 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

When using short descriptions, be consistent and apply them consistently where feasible.

It is important that if you incorporate short descriptions in your DITA topics, that you be consistent and include effective short descriptions where feasible. An effective short description conveys something of significance beyond what is already referenced by the topic's title, and it should not be a simple reformulation of the title. If the title fully connotes what a topic is about, then the short description is redundant, and it can be omitted. It should 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

Write task short descriptions so that readers understand what they can accomplish once they read the topic.

A task topic 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.
```

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.
```

Understanding the benefits of a task makes writing a short description for it easier.

How to Write Short Descriptions for Concept Topics

Write concept short descriptions so that readers understand not only what they will learn, but why doing so would be directly useful to them.

A concept topic describes the nature of something. 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 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

Write reference short descriptions so that readers why knowing the information in the topic is useful for them and under what circumstances.

A reference topic describes detailed reference material. For example: command syntax, a list of parameter values, a parts list, or other detailed, factual content. Short descriptions for reference topics should explain what an object does and why is it useful.

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

Now consider the following. What does it do? Why is it used? The following short description answers that.

```
The chdir command changes the context to a different directory.
```

How to Write Short Descriptions for Troubleshooting Topics

Write short descriptions for troubleshooting topics so that readers can assess whether or not the troubleshooting scenario applies to their situation, and to help them determine if it will help them solve a specific problem.

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.

Assume that the troubleshooting topic has the following title: "ACME Beartrap closes prematurely." The following example illustrates a poor short description for a troubleshooting topic:

```
How to troubleshoot issues with your ACME Bear Trap.
```

Instead, focus on the *situation* that the user is likely to encounter and make it clear what the *value* of the troubleshooting topic is.

```
Find out how to safely re-open the ACME Bear Trap 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

Examines the difference in behavior of short descriptions added to maps, scenarios for use, and how to write them effectively.

Within maps, short descriptions can be added within a pair of <topicmeta> elements, as in the following example:

```
...
<bookmap>
...
<topicref href="example.dita" type="concept">
  <topicmeta>
```

```
    <shortdesc>A practical example demonstrating why filbert flanges will not
 mesh with grapple grommets.</shortdesc>
  </topicmeta>
</topicref>
…
</bookmap>
```

Short descriptions added to maps have a different behavior than short descriptions added to topics. When processed for output, any short descriptions appearing at the map level should override any short descriptions appearing within a specific topic. For any peer-level topic links, such as those appearing within a relationship table, short descriptions contained within individual topics appear instead. This provides an opportunity to provide different information-finding content for readers depending on whether a reader is reading a map-based, parent-level link, or a peer, topic-level link.

To demonstrate this behavior, let's contrast this to an example of the topic targeted in the previous map example that has its own short description:

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
<!DOCTYPE concept PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Concept//EN" "concept.dtd">
<concept id="filbert-grapple">
 <title>Filbert Flanges and Grapple Grommits</title>
 <shortdesc>A practical examination of Filbert flange meshing behavior with a
 special focus on Grapple Grommits.</shortdesc>
 <conbody>
  <p>It is well-known that Filbert flanges will mesh with almost everything.
 Everything except grapple grommits.</p>
 </conbody>
</concept>
```

Here is sample WebHelp output displaying the short description from the map appearing below the link to the topic:

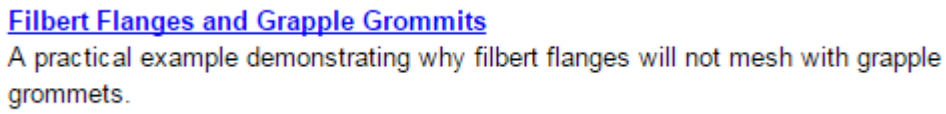

Figure 7: The short description from the map displayed alongside a parent-level link

And here is sample WebHelp output for the topic, where the short description that appears within the topic is what is displayed:

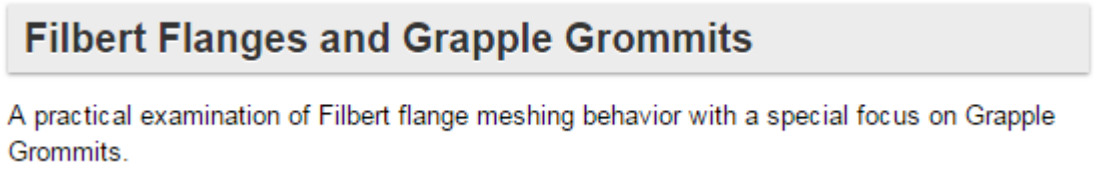

Figure 8: The short description from the topic displayed at the topic level

For many content creators having a two-tiered approach to short descriptions might seem like overkill, and in many cases it is not necessary. In those cases where you want to override the short description at the topic level because of a change in context at the parent level, this is a useful mechanism.

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.

In the case where the short description is designed to override any short description that exists at the topic level, 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.

Note: Some output processors do not render information from short descriptions added to a map. Before implementing short descriptions with your maps, determine beforehand whether your output generator supports it.

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. 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)

How the abstract element functions and how it can work with one or more shortdesc elements.

The <abstract> 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 <abstract> 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, as can be seen from the following screenshot of sample WebHelp output:

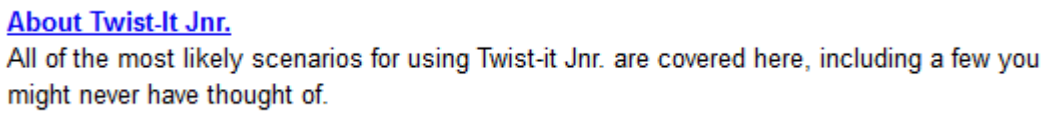

Figure 9: Only the short description appears underneath the parent-level link when embedded in an abstract

Within the topic, the full content of the abstract—including the short description—will be visible to the reader, appearing as though it were body content:

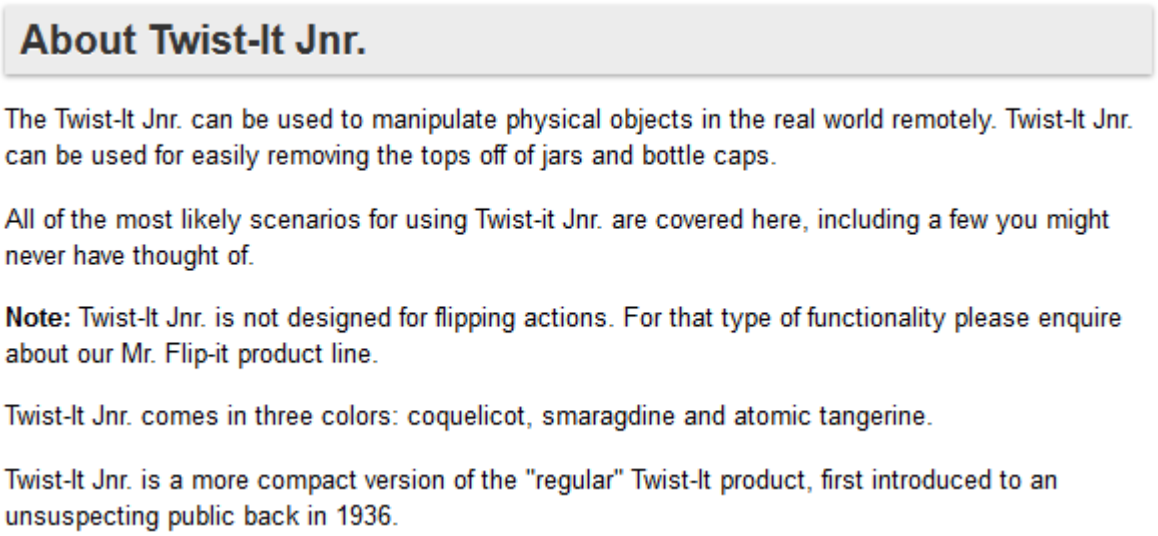

Figure 10: The content of the abstract—including the short description—appearing within the topic

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

Do Not Use Cross-references in Your Short Descriptions

Don't. Just don't.

"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

Looks at how to craft useful short descriptions for content converted to DITA, and what criteria to evaluate whether it is needed.

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

Summing up why short descriptions are a good idea.

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.

Effective short descriptions help readers find the content that they want faster than they could otherwise. 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.