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

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Writing Effective Short Descriptions

This article discusses the benefits of using short descriptions and presents best practices for creating them.

Why Short Descriptions are a Good Idea

Because short descriptions are not mandatory many content creators omit it. Unfortunately, they could be doing their readers a disservice.

What Is a Short Description?

A short description is the initial text for a topic

In most output formats, short descriptions appear as a brief paragraph. Some output formats also use the short descriptions as a link preview text for topics. Short descriptions are important enough that DITA provides a shortdesc element for use immediately after the topic title element.

A short description serves as an adjunct to a topic title further clarifying what a topic is about and why it might be of interest. This information helps readers decide whether to read a topic.

Why Use Short Descriptions?

Short descriptions are beneficial in ways you might not suspect.

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 have the following benefits:

- Short descriptions help readers find information more easily.
- They serve as a guide to content creators who write better targeted content for their readers.
- 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

Effective short descriptions can help readers determine whether a topic is pertinent to their needs. 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

Effective short descriptions provide 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 poor short description for a topic called "Introduction to Bird Calling" in the documentation for the Acme Bird Feeder:

Introduction to Bird Calling | 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.

Introduction to Bird Calling | Bird calling attracts birds to 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

The content of a short description appears differently depending on your output type.

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. While the DITA specification says that the content of the shortdesc element *should* be rendered as the initial paragraph of the topic, but in some cases stylesheets may have been changed so that short descriptions are no longer visible. Modifying stylesheets so that they no longer render short descriptions is arguably misguided and does a disservice to both the content creator and the reader for reasons that have already been outlined.

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

- The initial displayed 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 web page.
- As an associated description for a linked topic.

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

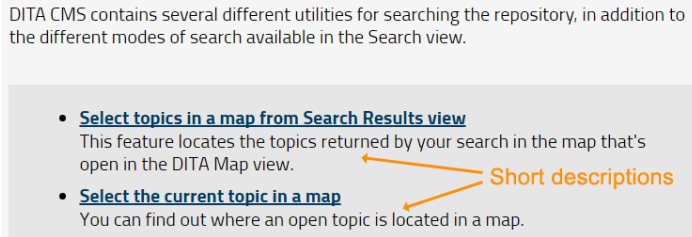


Figure 1: Short descriptions appearing under links on a web page

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

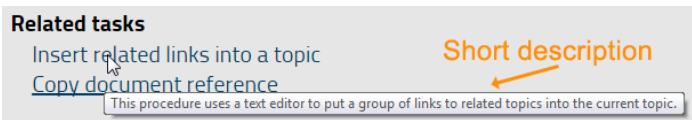


Figure 2: A short description appearing as a tooltip as a user hovers over a topic's web link

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 again the short description appears prior to the body content:

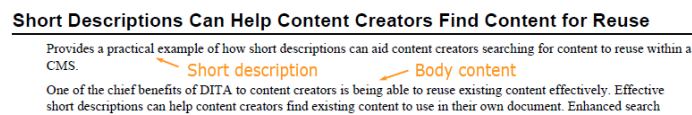


Figure 4: Topic where the short description does not appear prior to body content (PDF)

Short Descriptions in Place of Body Content

Short descriptions can be used where body content is brief, and at the start of sections or chapters.

Good Short Descriptions = Better Search Engine Results for Online Documents

Short descriptions appear within search engine results. An effective short description is important to enhancing 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.

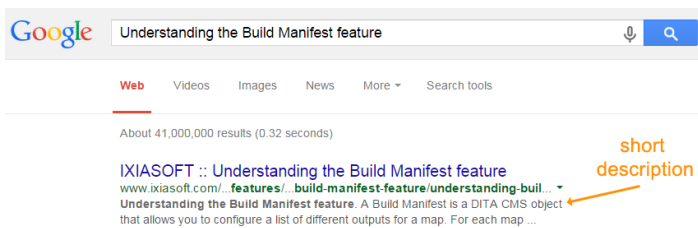


Figure 5: Sample search result in Google displaying short descriptions for a specific DITA topic

Short Descriptions Can Help Content Creators Find Content for Reuse

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:

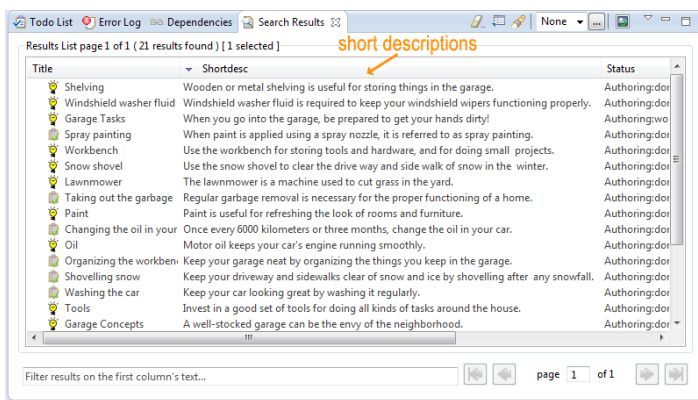


Figure 6: Short descriptions and their associated topic titles in a DITA-capable CMS search dialog

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 | Provides an overview of Widgets and how they are to be used in a retail setting alongside the Vebulon 2000.
- Widgets: An Introduction to the Product | A brief look at Widgets and the possible scenarios for their use, including retail, B2B and underwater environments.
- Widgets and You: An Introduction to Using Widgets Effectively | This is an overview of Widget usage for clients working in an aquatic environment.

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

There are eight best practices you should keep in mind when writing your short descriptions.

The following best practices are discussed in detail in subsequent sections:

- Write consistent short descriptions.
- 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 API topics, tell users what the API does, what it is used for, and what it returns.
- 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:

How to Set 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:

How to Set Security Settings | 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?" A concept short description should further elaborate upon the information that is in the title. Explain how users will benefit from this information. The following is a poor short description for a concept topic:

About Fuel Filters | 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:

About Fuel Filters | How fuel filters screen out dirt and rust particles from providing fuel injector units with cleaner fuel.

How to Write Short Descriptions for Reference Topics

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

A reference topic presents factual information. 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.

chdir | 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.

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

How to Write Short Descriptions for API Topics

Write short descriptions so that readers can easily find important information within an API topic.

Generally, API topics skip the short description. This is poor practice, as a good short description can provide information to the reader as to whether a particular method, class or function is pertinent to their needs.



Note: These API topic guidelines do not apply to conceptual or task-based programming topics. Programming topics should use task or concept topic types and follow the short description guidelines for those topics.

Include an effective short description even for short API reference topics. An API reference topic ought to cover the following points (as applicable):

- What the API is.
- What it does.
- What it returns.
- Whether the API is deprecated.

While most short descriptions ought to be written as sentences, it is acceptable to write them as phrases within an API context, as it is in keeping with the clipped tone of most API documentation.

The following short description is effective as it tells the reader the purpose of the API topic:

getCode method | Returns the status code from the data listener.

What does the following short description tell you about the API class?

DatastoreDefFed class | Accesses federated data store information.

It tells you that the class is used to access federated data, but that's it. What does this class do with the information it accesses? Is there anything else it can do? The following revamped short description provides a better understanding of the API topic to the reader:

DatastoreDefFed class | Defines methods to access federated data store information and to create and delete federated entities. It also provides methods for accessing search templates and server information.

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:

ACME Bear Trap Troubleshooting | 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.

ACME Bear Trap Troubleshooting | Find out how to adjust the spring sensitivity in order to prevent the trap going off prematurely.

Do Not Use Cross-references in Your Short Descriptions

Putting a cross-reference in a short description takes the reader away from the very topic it is supposed to introduce.

"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 out there that allows you to do this.

Why is this a bad idea? Let's go back to the intended use of the shortdesc element. To quote the 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 in this context makes no sense. Cross-references in this context would also be an invitation for the reader to head elsewhere. This detracts from the purpose of informing the reader as to what content is available in the topic whose short description they are reviewing.

Place any cross-references elsewhere within the body of the topic or in a related topics section.

Evaluate existing text in converted topics

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. Ensure that you evaluate your first paragraph.

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

How to Write Short Descriptions for Maps

Short descriptions that are added to maps behave differently.

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:

[Filbert Flanges and Grapple Grommits](#)

A practical example demonstrating why filbert flanges will not mesh with grapple grommits.

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:

Filbert Flanges and Grapple Grommits

A practical examination of Filbert flange meshing behavior with a special focus on Grapple Grommits.

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.

A short description can also be used within a map in order to associate a short description with a non-DITA object—such as a link to an external website—that otherwise would not have 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 is used to illustrate link behavior.</shortdesc>
  </topicmeta>
</topicref>
...
</map>
```



Note:

1. 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.

2. When processors generate link previews that are based on the map context, they should use the content of the shortdesc that is located in the map rather than the shortdesc that is located in the DITA topic.

Abstract and its Relation to Short Description(s)

The abstract element can incorporate zero, one, or more short descriptions within it. The element 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. Adding an abstract is useful when you have a paragraph's worth of content that describes the topic. You can include a shortdesc within an abstract so that the short description text is available for link previews.

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:

[About Twist-It Jnr.](#)

All of the most likely scenarios for using Twist-it Jnr. are covered here, including a few you might never have thought of.

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:



About Twist-It Jnr.

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.

All of the most likely scenarios for using Twist-it Jnr. are covered here, including a few you might never have thought of.

Note: Twist-It Jnr. is not designed for flipping actions. For that type of functionality please enquire about our Mr. Flip-it product line.

Twist-It Jnr. comes in three colors: coquelicot, smaragdine and atomic tangerine.

Twist-It Jnr. is a more compact version of the "regular" Twist-It product, first introduced to an unsuspecting public back in 1936.

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.

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.