

Art of short descriptions



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Background

- **Long-time DITA user and geek.**
- **Skilled as BOTH a content person AND a technical resource: Developer of DTDs and RNG, specialization, constraints, custom Oxygen environments, etc.**
- **History of this presentation:**
 - 2007 DITA Europe
 - 2014 DITA Europe
 - And now here

Agenda

1. **Demo?**
2. **What is a short description?**
3. **How <shortdesc> in DITA topics is used when rendered**
4. **Guidelines for short descriptions**
 - a) Task topics
 - b) Concept topics
 - c) Reference topics
5. **How writing short descriptions can affect content and architecture**
6. **<shortdesc> in other contexts:**
 - ◆ In DITA maps, in <abstract> element
 - ◆ In <subjectScheme>
7. **Quality control and short descriptions**
8. **Summary**

What is a short description?

- **The content of an optional element: <shortdesc>**
- **Serves as an advance organizer; provides a short overview of the topic, its content, and why it matters**
- **It is valid in two locations:**
 - Map
 - Topic
- **Should be 50 words or less; 1 or 2 sentences**

<shortdesc> within a topic

concept id="about-plaque" xml:lang="en-us"

title **Plaque** title

shortdesc *Short Description:* term *Plaque* term is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease. shortdesc

conbody p Your mouth is a busy place. Bacteria -- tiny colonies of living organisms -- are constantly on the move on your teeth, gums, lips and tongue. Certain types of bacteria, however, can attach themselves to hard surfaces like the enamel that covers your teeth. If they are not removed, they multiply and grow in number until a colony forms. More bacteria of different types attach to the colony already growing on the tooth enamel. Proteins that are present in your saliva mix in, and the bacteria becomes a whitish film on the teeth. This film is called term

plaque term . p conbody concept

<shortdesc> within a DITA map


▼ `topicref href="constraints.dita"`  Topicref [href="constraints.dita"]

`topicmeta` `shortdesc` Constraints are the formal mechanism that enables information architects to restrict the content model of a DITA element or domain. `shortdesc`

`topicmeta`

▼ `topicref href="constraints-overview.dita"`  Topicref [href="constraints-overview.dita"]

`topicref`

▼ `topicref href="constraints.dita"`  Topicref [href="constraints.dita"]

Rendered as the 1st paragraph of a topic

Plaque

Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.

Your mouth is a busy place. Bacteria – tiny colonies of living organisms – are constantly on the move on your teeth, gums, lips and tongue. Certain types of bacteria,



Rendered as link previews in HTML output ...

Concepts

This section discusses concepts that will help you understand how to properly care for your teeth.

Cavities

Cavities (or dental caries) are caused by acid erosion of tooth enamel.

Gingivitis

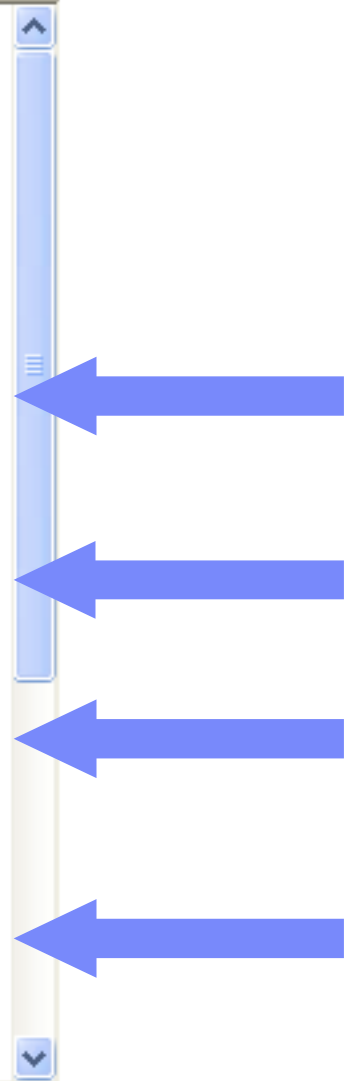
Gingivitis is an inflammation of the gums. It is a form of periodontal disease that is caused by the long-term effects of plaque deposits.

Periodontal disease

Periodontal diseases are serious gum infections that, left untreated, can lead to tooth loss.

Plaque

Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.



Link previews

- Generated by nesting of <topicref> elements
- Display the content of <title> and <shortdesc>

```
• dental-concepts.ditamap x
1 <!DOCTYPE map PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Map//EN" "map.dtd">
2 <map>
3   <title>Dental tips</title>
4   <topicref href="dental-health-concepts.dita">
5     <topicref href="cavities.dita"/>
6     <topicref href="gingivitis.dita"/>
7     <topicref href="periodontal-disease.dita"/>
8     <topicref href="plaque.dita"/>
9   </topicref>
10 </map>
...

• plaque.dita* x
1 <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
2 <!DOCTYPE concept PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Concept//EN" "concept.dtd">
3 <concept id="concept">
4   <title>Plaque</title>
5   <shortdesc>Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel of
6     your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both
7     tooth decay and gum disease.</shortdesc>
8   <conbody>
```

Concepts

This section discusses concepts that will help you understand how to properly care for your teeth.

Cavities

Cavities (or dental caries) are caused by acid erosion of tooth enamel.

Gingivitis

Gingivitis is an inflammation of the gums. It is a form of periodontal disease that is caused by the long-term effects of plaque deposits.

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Plaque

Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.

Rendered as hover text in HTML output ...

When readers hover over the navigation links, the short description of the DITA topic also is displayed.

Parent topic: [1 Introduction](#)

Previous topic: [1.3 Non-normative references](#)

Next topic: [2 Architectural specification](#)

Return to [main page](#).

Non-normative references are references to external documents or resources that implementers of DITA might find useful.

OASIS DITA Version 1.2 -- OASIS Standard, 1 December 2010

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<shortdesc> in search results



The screenshot shows a web interface for 'Darwin Information Typing Architecture'. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'Content', 'Search', and 'Index', and the text 'Architectural Specification: Base'. Below this is a search bar containing the word 'navigation' and a 'Search' button. The search results are displayed under the heading 'Results for: navigation'. The first result is a link to 'Navigation', followed by a red-bordered box containing the text: 'DITA includes markup that processors can use to generate reader navigation to or across DITA topics. Such navigation behaviors include table of contents (TOCs) and indexes...'. Below this are two more results: 'Related links elements' and 'Disciplined, topic-oriented writing', each with a brief description.

Darwin Information Typing Architecture

Content Search Index Architectural Specification: Base

navigation Search

Results for: **navigation**

[Navigation](#)
DITA includes markup that processors can use to generate reader navigation to or across DITA topics. Such navigation behaviors include table of contents (TOCs) and indexes...

[Related links elements](#)
The related-links section of DITA topics is a special structure that contains links. Links support navigation from a topic to other related topics or resources...

[Disciplined, topic-oriented writing](#)
Topic-oriented writing is a disciplined approach to writing that emphasizes the organization of information: topic

Short description adds value

- **First paragraph**

- Thesis statement
- Users can quickly access whether content is useful to them

- **Link previews**

- Summary of content
- Helps readers navigate successfully without massive scanning of content

- **Hover text**

- Gives the user more information than is in the title

- **Search aid**

- Rendered output and within a CCMS environment

Guidelines for ALL topics

Don't ...

- **Restate the title**
- **State the obvious, for example, “You can use XYZ to do A”**
- **Start the short description with phrases such as “This topic describes ...” or “This topic is about ...”**
- **Use the short description as a lead-in to or build-up that does not stand on its own as a complete information entity. For example, “Topics serve the following purposes:”**

Guidelines for task topics

- **Explain what the task helps the users accomplish**
 - Answer the question: “What are the benefits of the task?”
 - Answer the question: “What is the purpose of the task?”
- **Include information about when the users should perform the task or why the task is necessary**
- **(If applicable) Include information about who should perform the task and where it should be performed**

Guidelines for task topics: Examples

Basic

Changing data types

You can use the ALTER NICKNAME statement to change the data type of a column.

Improved and effective

Changing data types

You can change the data type of a column so that your data types are consistent across tables. Use the ALTER NICKNAME statement to change the data type of a column.

Guidelines for concept topics

- **Introduce the concept and provide a concise answer to the question "What is this?" and (if needed) "Why do I care about this?"**
- **Start with a brief definition, if the concept is unfamiliar.**
- **Make sure that the short description contains the main point of the topic.**

Guidelines for concept topics: Examples

Basic

Crawlers

This topic is about crawlers, which are programs that search for information

Improved and effective

Crawlers

Crawlers are programs that search for information on the Web, in databases, or in other data sources. The information that the crawlers gather is added to the search engine index. Crawlers must run regularly to ensure that the search engine index is up to date.

Guidelines for reference topics

- **Explain the following points:**
 - What an item is
 - What the item does
 - What the item is used for

Guidelines for reference topics: Examples

Basic

COUNT command

DB2 Universal Database provides a COUNT command.

Improved and effective

COUNT command

The COUNT command displays the current number of rows in the table. The rows are counted by the SQL SELECT COUNT(*) function.

<shortdesc> in a DITA map

Can override the contents of the <shortdesc> located in a topic

- `topicref href="brushing_your_teeth_t.dita" navtitle="Brushing your teeth" >Brushing your teeth`

topicmeta

shortdesc

This text is located in a <shortdesc> element in the DITA map. It overrides the content of the <shortdesc> located in a topic, but only in the generated links.

shortdesc

topicmeta

topicref

Tasks

Brushing and flossing your teeth properly can prevent cavities, gingivitis, and periodontal disease. These dental problems cause at least one-third of adult tooth loss.

Brushing your teeth

This text is located in a <shortdesc> element in the DITA map. It overrides the content of the <shortdesc> located in a topic, but only in the generated links.

Flossing your teeth

Flossing your teeth removes food debris and plaque that lodge between the teeth and under the gum line.



<shortdesc> in a DITA map: Example

IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server



WebSphere. IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server, Version 6.2

Messages

A message explains a problem and suggests a user action. In addition, each message ID includes a component ID, a number, and a letter that indicates the type of message: Informational, warning, or error.

Messages

Messages

Messages

Parent topic: [Troubleshooting IBM XDMS](#)

Terms of use

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<shortdesc> in a DITA map

IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server



WebSphere. IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server, Version 6.2

Messages

A message explains a problem and suggests a user action. In addition, each message ID includes a component ID, a number, and a letter that indicates the type of message: Informational, warning, or error.

Messages

Error messages generated by the Trust Association Interceptor (TAI) component

Messages

Error messages generated by the XML Configuration Access Protocol (XCAP)

Messages

Error messages generated by XML Document Management Server (XDMS)

Parent topic: [Troubleshooting IBM XDMS](#)

Terms of use

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Writing short descriptions effects the content

- Writing good short descriptions is a difficult, time-consuming, and iterative task.
- Forces writers to clarify what is the main point or thesis of a topic.
- Once a good short description is crafted, often the hardest work is done.

“I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time.”

Blaise Pascal, 1656

Writing short descriptions effects information architecture

- Can lead to reassessing granularity and scope
- If a <shortdesc> doesn't add value, is the topic really needed?
- If a <shortdesc> can't be adequately contained in a few sentences, is the writer trying to do too much in a single topic?
- Can ensure consistency of topic short descriptions

<shortdesc> in <abstract>

- **<abstract> can contain more complex markup**
- **Potential uses:**
 - Can hold multiple <shortdesc>
 - Useful for reuse topics
 - Useful for filtering
 - Can contain more complex thesis statement when necessary

How content of <abstract> is displayed

- **Full content of <abstract> is displayed on the topic page**
- **Content of <shortdesc> within <abstract> is used in:**
 - Automatically-generated link previews
 - Hover text
- **If <abstract> contains multiple <shortdesc>, they are:**
 - Concatenated in automatically-generated link previews and hover text
 - Concatenated on the topic page

More complex information in <abstract>

reference id="Brussels_hotels" xml:lang="en-us"

title **Brussels hotels** title

abstract

shortdesc You have many options for arranging lodging in Brussels: hotels, bed and breakfasts, youth hostels and flats. You can select from a wide price range, level of excellence, location, and character. shortdesc

simpletable

Price category	Description
€	Under 80 <u>euros</u>
€€	80-130 <u>euros</u>
€€€	130-180 <u>euros</u>
€€€€	180-260 <u>euros</u>
€€€€€	Over 260 <u>euros</u>

simpletable

abstract

More complex information in <abstract>

Can
provide a
useful
key to
symbols



Brussels hotels

You have many options for arranging lodging in Brussels: hotels, bed and breakfasts, youth hostels and flats. You can select from a wide price range, level of excellence, location, and character.

Price category	Description
€	Under 80 euros
€€	80-130 euros
€€€	130-180 euros
€€€€	180-260 euros
€€€€€	Over 260 euros

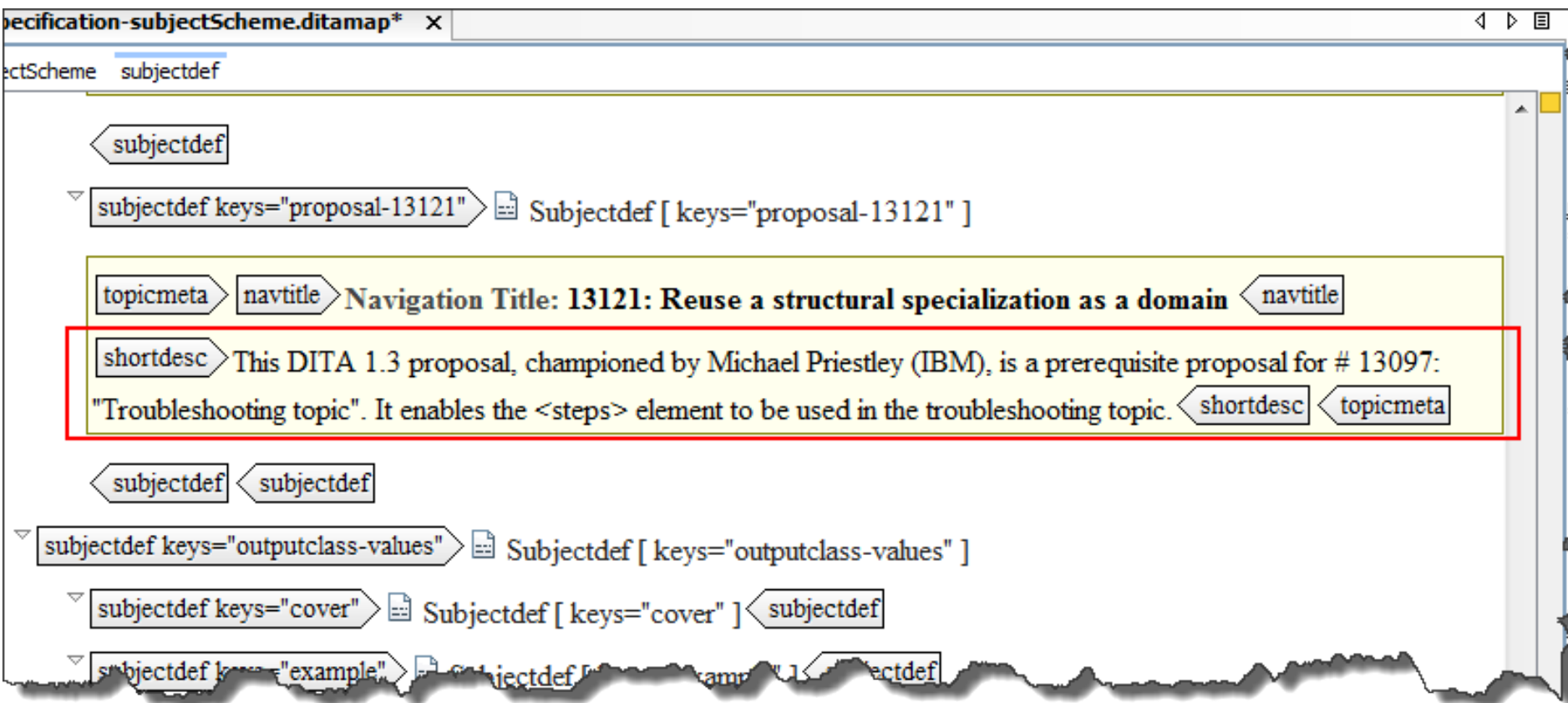
Queen Anne

€€. Close to the De Brouckere metro station, the welcoming Hotel Queen Anne is small, but friendly, with clean, comfortable rooms and a generous buffet breakfast. All rooms have ensuite facilities. The peaceful location and relaxed atmosphere is perfect for families.

Hotel Metropole

€€€. Built 1895, this plush hotel boasts striking architecture and a mix of French Renaissance, Empire and Art Deco styles. High ceilings, stained-glass restaurant, and crystal chandeliers in the lobby, bar and gourmet

<shortdesc> and subject scheme



Specification-subjectScheme.ditamap* x

SubjectScheme subjectdef

subjectdef

subjectdef keys="proposal-13121" Subjectdef [keys="proposal-13121"]

topicmeta navtitle Navigation Title: 13121: Reuse a structural specialization as a domain navtitle

shortdesc This DITA 1.3 proposal, championed by Michael Priestley (IBM), is a prerequisite proposal for # 13097: "Troubleshooting topic". It enables the <steps> element to be used in the troubleshooting topic. shortdesc topicmeta

subjectdef subjectdef

subjectdef keys="outputclass-values" Subjectdef [keys="outputclass-values"]

subjectdef keys="cover" Subjectdef [keys="cover"] subjectdef

subjectdef keys="example" Subjectdef [keys="example"] subjectdef

- Can provide information for writers about controlled values for attributes
- Can provide information for writers about classification and for end users about search facets

Quality control and short descriptions

- **Consider implementing constraints to make the <shortdesc> element mandatory.**
- **Use Schematron to check on the length of short descriptions.**

The ZIP on the conference download site will include:

- Sample constraints
- Instructions for integrating constraints
- Sample Schematron rules

Summary: Short descriptions are ...

- **An elegant progressive-disclosure device**
- **Unique to DITA**
- **Interesting intersection**
 - Structured authoring and topic-based writing
 - Old-fashioned principles of effective writing
- **Can dramatically improve the following:**
 - Quality of content and architecture
 - Usability of an information set
- **Large benefit for a small expense**

New slide! My current questions ...

- **Are there best practices for base topics?**
- **Best practices for topics designed only for PDF and single-page HTML output? New output formats?**
- **Best practices for programmatically-generated topics?**
- **What are YOUR questions?**

Questions?

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