

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

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Who We Are



1973

Founded in
San Antonio, TX



Vast experience in
all types of XML-
based authoring
and conversion
(SGML, XML, DITA,
S1000D)

10

Years of experience
helping companies
implement the
DITA standard



Equipped with the
resources to tackle
a project of any size
from beginning to
end



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Who We Are



IXIASOFT is a trusted leader in the content management software industry. For over 15 years, our customers have relied on us to provide innovative solutions that are both scalable and reliable for their mission critical applications. Every day, our technology is accessed by thousands of users in over 20 countries worldwide, allowing companies and their employees to be successful by enhancing productivity, efficiency and accuracy.



Meet the Presenters

Joe Storbeck

Senior Structured Data Analyst

Joe has been working closely with the DITA specification since its release at IBM in 2001, and is a highly regarded expert in its use and application



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Meet the Presenters

Keith Schengili-Roberts

Market Researcher and DITA Evangelist

25+ years experience in technical writing
sector, 10+ with DITA XML

Liaison with OASIS on Lightweight DITA, DITA
Adoption and DITA Technical Committees



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What Is a Short Description?

- It is often the initial text for a topic
- Clarifies what a topic is about
- Indicates why it might be of interest to the reader



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Why Use Short Descriptions?

- Short descriptions are optional.
- Content creators find them hard to write and easy to omit.



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Why Use Short Descriptions?

"...of all the DITA elements, shortdesc is most like a credit card with a loyalty program that rewards you for using it."

-Don Day



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Why Use Short Descriptions?

- 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).



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Where Are Short Descriptions Displayed?

- 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.



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Short Descriptions Make Content “Easier” for Readers

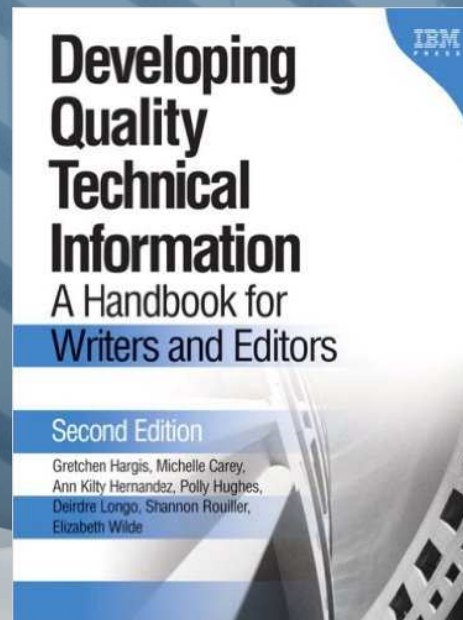
- Effective short descriptions can help readers determine whether a topic is pertinent to their needs.
- Good short descriptions enhances customers' overall experience of a product.



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Short Descriptions Make Content “Easier” for Readers

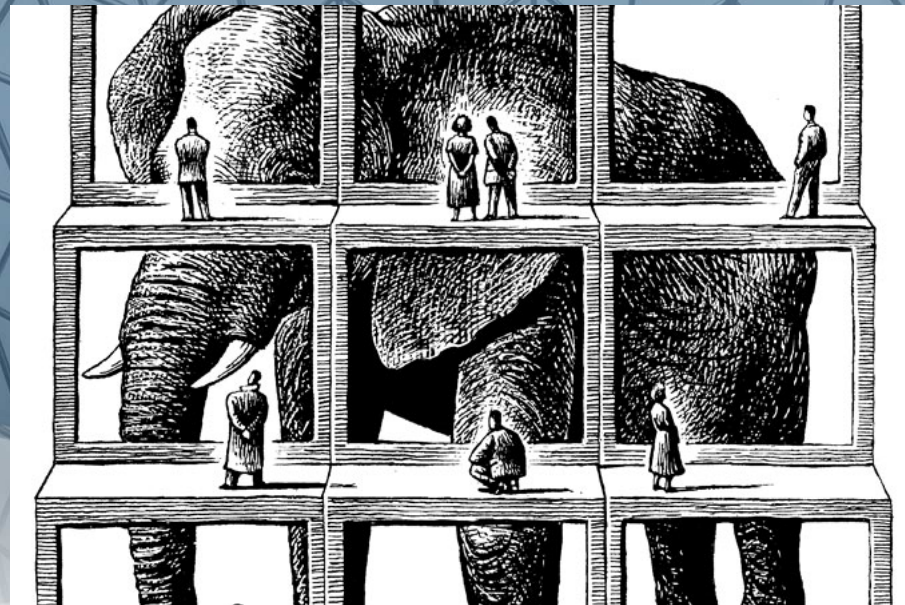
- In *Developing Quality Technical Information*, the authors identify the characteristics that quality information shares:
 - Easy to use.
 - Easy to understand.
 - Easy to find.



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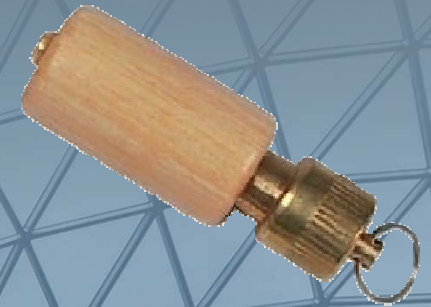
How to Tell Readers to Read Your Topic

- Effective short descriptions provide enough context for a reader to understand what the topic conveys.



Examples

Topic is called "Introduction to Bird Calling"



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

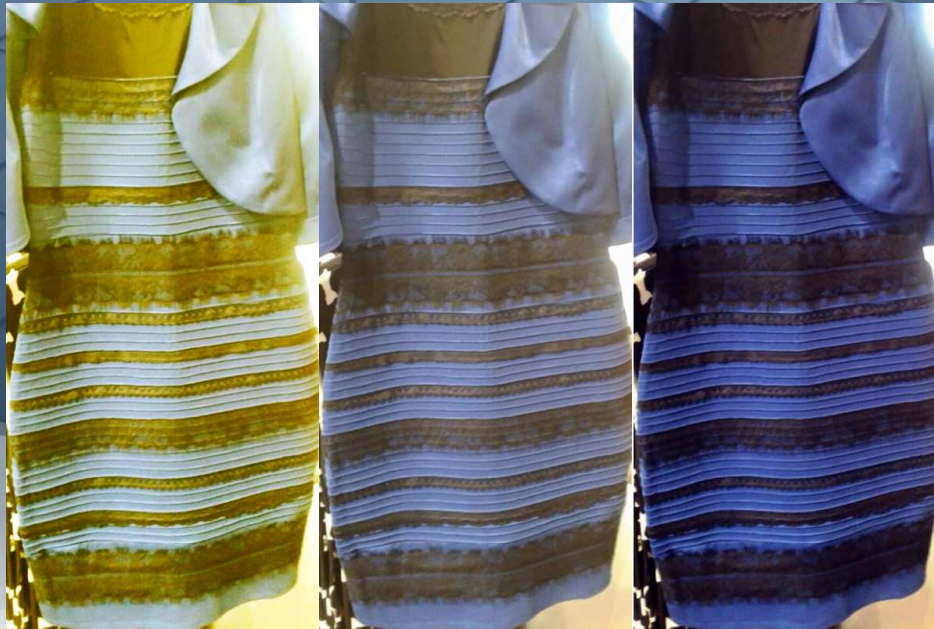
Bird calling attracts birds to your bird feeder. 



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How and Where Short Descriptions Appear

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



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How and Where Short Descriptions Appear

- Short descriptions appear as:
 - The initial displayed content.
 - 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.
 - An associated description for a linked topic.



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Examples

- Short descriptions appearing under links on a web page.

DITA CMS contains several different utilities for searching the repository, in addition to the different modes of search available in the Search view.

- **Select topics in a map from Search Results view**
This feature locates the topics returned by your search in the map that's open in the DITA Map view.
- **Select the current topic in a map**
You can find out where an open topic is located in a map.

Short descriptions



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Examples

- A short description appearing as a tooltip as a user hovers over a topic's web link.

Related tasks

[Insert related links into a topic](#)

[Copy document reference](#)

This procedure uses a text editor to put a group of links to related topics into the current topic.

Short description



Examples

- Short description appearing prior to body content within in a topic (WebHelp).

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.

← Short description

← Body content

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.



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Examples

- Topic where the short description does not appear prior to body content (PDF).

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.

Short description

Body content

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



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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.

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.*

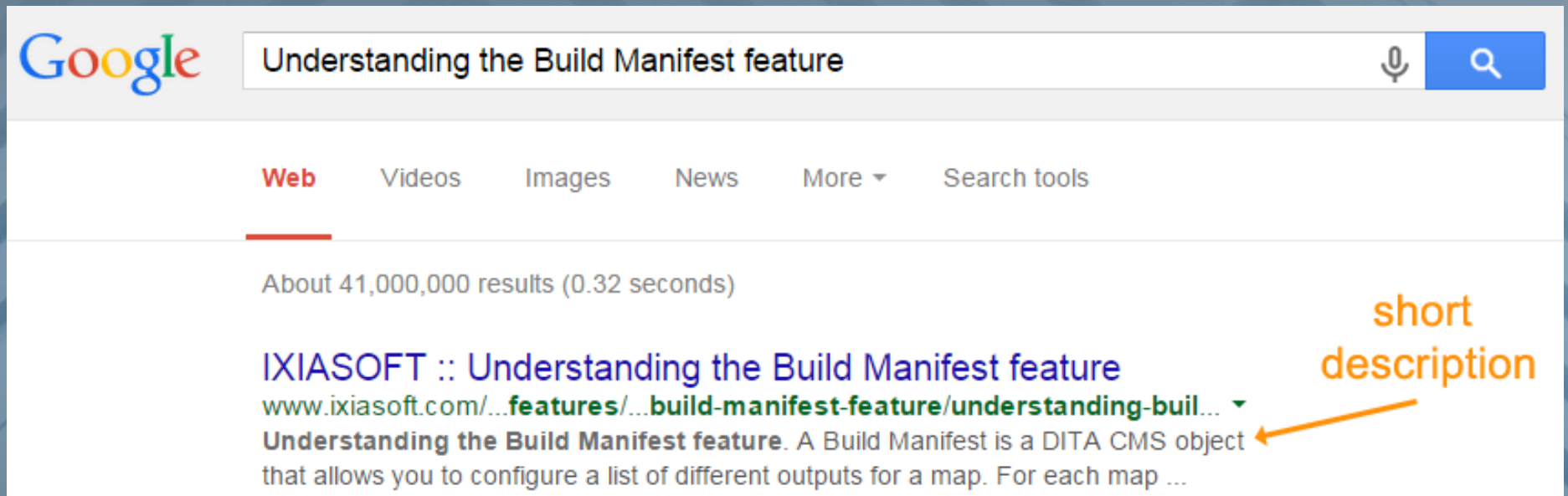
- In this case, all there is to the body content *is* the short description

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).
- Do not under-estimate the usefulness of a short description from this perspective! As you will see, it is one of the key ways to help your users find your content.



Example



The image shows a Google search interface. The search bar contains the text "Understanding the Build Manifest feature". Below the search bar, there are tabs for "Web", "Videos", "Images", "News", "More", and "Search tools". The "Web" tab is selected. Below the tabs, it says "About 41,000,000 results (0.32 seconds)". The first search result is from IXIASOFT, titled "IXIASOFT :: Understanding the Build Manifest feature". The URL is "www.ixiasoft.com/...features/...build-manifest-feature/understanding-buil...". The snippet of the result reads: "Understanding the Build Manifest feature. A Build Manifest is a DITA CMS object that allows you to configure a list of different outputs for a map. For each map ...". An orange arrow points from the text "short description" to the snippet of the search result.

Google

Understanding the Build Manifest feature

Web Videos Images News More Search tools

About 41,000,000 results (0.32 seconds)

IXIASOFT :: Understanding the Build Manifest feature
www.ixiasoft.com/...features/...build-manifest-feature/understanding-buil...
Understanding the Build Manifest feature. A Build Manifest is a DITA CMS object that allows you to configure a list of different outputs for a map. For each map ...

short description

An Example of Good vs. "OK" Short Descriptions in SEO

- Take a look at this extended search result. Which short description is the most effective?

IXIASOFT :: Understanding the Build Manifest feature

www.ixiasoft.com/...build-manifest-feature/understanding-build-manifest-feature/

Understanding the Build Manifest feature. A Build Manifest is a DITA CMS object that allows you to configure a list of different outputs for a map. For each map....

IXIASOFT :: Using the Build Manifest feature

www.ixiasoft.com/en/products/dita-cms/.../4-1/.../using-build-manifest-feature/

This section describes how to use the Build Manifest feature. Understanding the Build Manifest feature. A Build Manifest is a DITA CMS object that allows you to ...

IXIASOFT :: Add and configure output types

www.ixiasoft.com/en/...build-manifest-feature/add-and-configure-output-types/

Understanding the Build Manifest feature · Create a Build Manifest You add and configure output types in the Outputs tab of the Build Manifest window.... The Build Manifest feature retrieves the list of available output types from the running ...



How shortdesc is Expressed in HTML

- Content contained in shortdesc is transformed into meta name="description" content="(shortdesc content)" in HTML
- Google Webmasters acknowledge that this is metadata content that they follow



Meta tags that Google understands



Google understands the following meta tags (and related items):

```
<meta name="description"
content="A description of the
page" />
```

This tag provides a short description of the page. In some situations this description is used as a part of the snippet shown in the search results. [More information](#)



Google Webmasters Recommendations for Writing Good Meta Descriptions

- The potential of a good meta description: "The description attribute within the <meta> tag is a good way to provide a concise, human-readable summary of each page's content."
- "...make sure your descriptions are truly descriptive. Because the meta descriptions aren't displayed in the pages the user sees, it's easy to let this content slide. But high-quality descriptions can be displayed in Google's search results, and can go a long way to improving the quality and quantity of your search traffic."



Some Additional Guidelines from Google

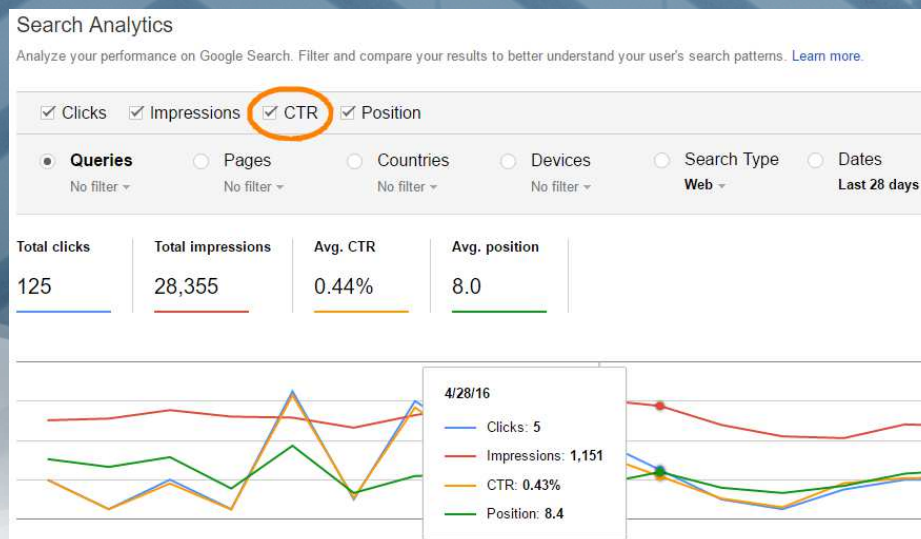
- Make sure that every page on your site has a meta description
 - Google even provides a tool for checking this at: <https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/80407> where one of the things it searches for are meta description problems, such as duplicate or what they consider “problematic” meta descriptions.
- Differentiate the descriptions for different pages
 - If you are following DITA writing best practices, this should not be a problem (but the Google tool may still be useful here)



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Short Descriptions and Click-throughs

- While short descriptions are not factored in search engine rankings, user behaviours are
- Google measures click-through rates (CTR)
- A well-written, descriptive short description ensures more click-throughs



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Another Reason for Writing Effective Short Descriptions

- Google will not automatically use a short description if it does not consider it to be sufficiently descriptive:

"Google will sometimes use the meta description of a page in search results snippets, if we think it gives users a more accurate description than would be possible purely from the on-page content."

- If you follow the best practices described in this presentation this should not be a problem!



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DITA Short Descriptions Per Topic Type for SEO

- A well-written short description tells the would-be reader why it is worth clicking on
 - Task: tell users what they can accomplish
 - Concept: tell users about what you are describing and why they should care
 - Reference: tell users what the referenced item does or what it can be used for
 - Troubleshooting: describe the symptoms of a problem a user may encounter and let them know that this topic can help
- While shortdesc best practices suggests two sentences, Google truncates search results at ~156 characters
- Need to put most important content first!



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.
- An effective short description makes it easier for writers to determine *which* topic is a target for reuse.



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Example

Results List page 1 of 1 (21 results found) [1 selected]

short descriptions

Title	Shortdesc	Status
Shelving	Wooden or metal shelving is useful for storing things in the garage.	Authoring:dor
Windshield washer fluid	Windshield washer fluid is required to keep your windshield wipers functioning properly.	Authoring:dor
Garage Tasks	When you go into the garage, be prepared to get your hands dirty!	Authoring:wo
Spray painting	When paint is applied using a spray nozzle, it is referred to as spray painting.	Authoring:dor
Workbench	Use the workbench for storing tools and hardware, and for doing small projects.	Authoring:dor
Snow shovel	Use the snow shovel to clear the drive way and side walk of snow in the winter.	Authoring:dor
Lawnmower	The lawnmower is a machine used to cut grass in the yard.	Authoring:dor
Taking out the garbage	Regular garbage removal is necessary for the proper functioning of a home.	Authoring:dor
Paint	Paint is useful for refreshing the look of rooms and furniture.	Authoring:dor
Changing the oil in your	Once every 6000 kilometers or three months, change the oil in your car.	Authoring:dor
Oil	Motor oil keeps your car's engine running smoothly.	Authoring:dor
Organizing the workben	Keep your garage neat by organizing the things you keep in the garage.	Authoring:dor
Shovelling snow	Keep your driveway and sidewalks clear of snow and ice by shovelling after any snowfall.	Authoring:dor
Washing the car	Keep your car looking great by washing it regularly.	Authoring:dor
Tools	Invest in a good set of tools for doing all kinds of tasks around the house.	Authoring:dor
Garage Concepts	A well-stocked garage can be the envy of the neighborhood.	Authoring:dor

Filter results on the first column's text...

page 1 of 1

Short Description Best Practices

- Write short descriptions consistently for 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.



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Short Description Best Practices

- 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 the user 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.



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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.



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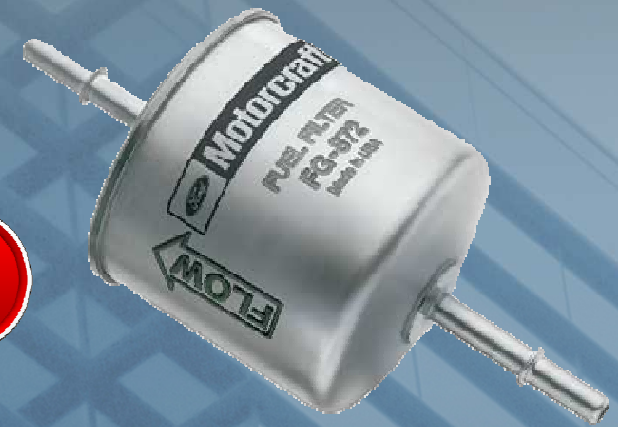
Examples

- Topic is called "About Fuel Filters"

This topic covers 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.



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Examples

- The topic is called "chdir".

```
C:\>chdir
```

The chdir command is used in directories.



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.
- Remember your audience: programmers who just want the info they need *quickly*



Examples

- The API topic is called "getCode method"

Returns the status code from the data listener.



Examples

- The API topic is called "DatastoreDefFed"

Accesses federated data store information.



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.



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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.



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Examples

- The troubleshooting topic is called "ACME Beartrap closes prematurely."

How to troubleshoot issues with your ACME Beartrap.



Find out how to adjust the spring sensitivity in order to prevent the trap going off prematurely.



Using a Short Description within a DITA Map

- Yes, you can actually add a short description to a DITA map; can add shortdesc within a topicmeta
- At output, the map short description overrides what appears at the topic level, but not at peer level (such as within a relationship table)

Example

- Example of topic displaying map-level short description:

[Filbert Flanges and Grapple Grommits](#)

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

- The same topic's short description when viewed at the topic level:

Filbert Flanges and Grapple Grommits

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



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Another Possible Use: External Link Description

- 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.

```
...  
<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>
```

Add Short Descriptions to Your Maps?

- In many cases this two-tiered approach to short descriptions is overkill; do not consider this a necessity
- Can be useful way to present a different information finding context for your readers from map/topic level
- Not all processors render short description information when added to a map



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Short Descriptions and Abstract

- Content of abstract is designed to be presented as the initial content of a topic. It can incorporate zero, one, or more short descriptions within it.
- So a sentence or two within an abstract can be used as a short description(s).

Example

```
...  
<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>
```

- When output as a link preview for a topic:

[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.



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Example

- The content of the topic (including the short description) appearing within the topic:

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.

The short description appearing within the abstract content



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A Final Word About Using shortdesc in abstract

- According to the DITA specification abstract can hold multiple instances of shortdesc. But how this would work at output—in terms of which shortdesc is displayed—depends on the setup of your output generator and output type.
- So test this out prior to using it!



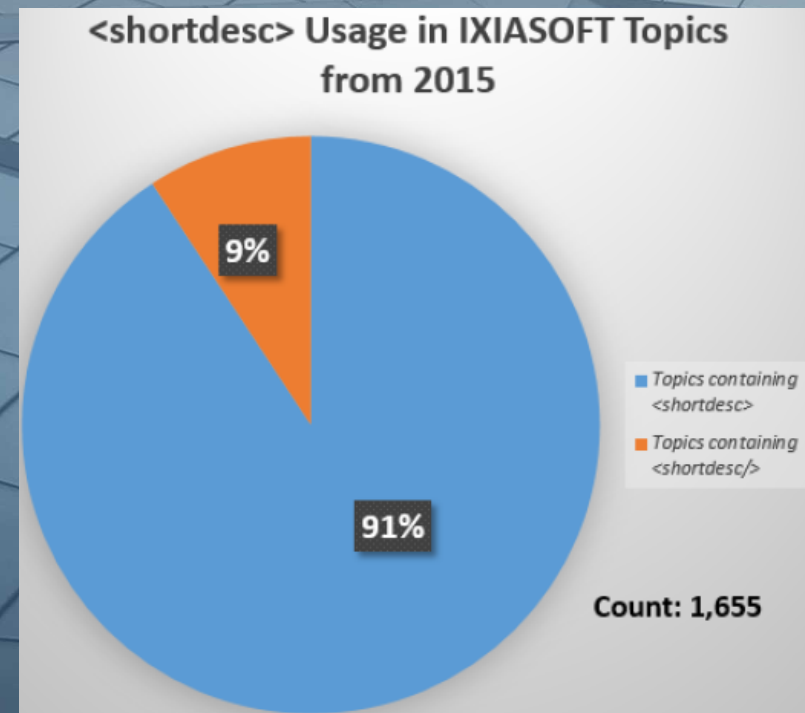
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Do Not Use Cross-references!

- While normal processing forbids this, it can be done via a hack. But resist the temptation!
- Why? Putting a cross-reference in a short description takes the reader *away* from the very topic it is supposed to introduce.

Quality Control for Short Descriptions

- If your CCMS supports it, check completed topics for empty short descriptions (<shortdesc/>).



Quality Control for Short Descriptions

- Consider implementing a Schematron rule to ensure that short descriptions meet a pre-determined character count threshold.

```
<pattern is-a="restrictWords" id="restrictDescription">  
  <param name="parentElement" value="shortdesc"/>  
  <param name="minWords" value="3"/>  
  <param name="maxWords" value="50"/>  
</pattern>
```

- Example from oXygen:

<https://www.oxygenxml.com/events/2015/Schematron4ia.dita.pdf>



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A Possible Approach to Writing Effective Short Descriptions

- A short description can either be the first thing you write or the last for a given topic
 - If first thing: it is a thesis statement saying what the content in the topic should be; useful for IAs to indicate to tech writer or SME what content should go into a topic
 - If last thing: summarizes what actually went into the topic; when done with a critical eye, may make you rethink what went into a topic
- From an editorial perspective, short description should capture the essence of a topic minus its detail



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For More Information

- Download the [White Paper](#)
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Questions? Comments?



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obrigado

Dank U

Merci

mahalo

Köszi

спасибо

Grazie

Thank
you

mauruuru

Takk

Gracias

Dziękuję

Děkuju

danke

Kiitos