A Style Guide for DITA Authoring

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Context

• “Informed” by academic research at Swinburne University
• What constitutes best practice in the Darwin Information Typing Architecture for technical publications?
What is DITA again?

• DITA is a new open standard for the creation and management of written documents such as policies and procedures, teaching and learning documents, Help systems, Web sites and instruction manuals.
• DITA is many things in one. It is:
  - an XML language
  - a writing methodology
  - a topic-based information architecture
  - a structured authoring platform.
For Tech Writers...

• The DITA approach utterly separates content from its presentation by using document semantics as the basis for mark-up.
• It takes a modular approach
• It is very different from the existing methods of:
  - linear writing
  - style-based markup

Two differences to focus on

• Separation of content and form
  – Author not concerned with presentational form
• Modularity
  – Documents written as re-useable components
Different Approaches

1985?

- No Web
- No mobile phone
- No iPod
- No MP3
- No digital cameras
- No Java, XML, HTML
- Y2K still 15 years away
Three Ages of Tech Writing

• Before computerisation
  - Long-hand
  - Demarcation of skills

• Computerisation
  - Word processors (WordPerfect, Word)
  - Desktop publishing (Ventura, PageMaker, FrameMaker)

• Modular
  - XML-based
  - Methodologies (eg, DITA)

Influences on Tech Comms

- Globalisation
- Embedded UA
- Modularity
- Dublin Core
- Agile
- Re-use
- Single-sourcing
- Facets
The Need for a DITA Style Guide

What is a Style Manual?

- A set of standards governing the design and writing of documents.
- Usually takes the form of a printed manual.
- Originators: publishing organisations, standards bodies, government agencies and publication departments
- Examples:
  - AGPS Style Manual
  - Chicago Manual of Style
  - News Limited Style
Need for a DITA Style Manual

• Style manuals promote consistency
  - Leading to authority
  - and readability

• Existing Style Manuals focus on style-based authoring, and most are entirely unsuitable for semantic authoring

• One of the difficulties of DITA adoption is working without a relevant Style Manual

Style Guide Content vs Form

- **Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers**
  - Content (Editorial) Style: 45%
  - Presentational Style: 55%

- **Style Book – A Guide for New Zealand Writers and Editors**
  - Content (Editorial) Style: 58%
  - Presentational Style: 42%
Style Guide Content vs Form

- Chicago Manual of Style: 30%
- News Limited Style: 70%

“Traditional” Style Manual Use

- Macquarie Dictionary
- Microsoft Manual of Style
- Fowler’s Modern English Usage
- AGPS Style Manual
- Marketing House Style

Corporate (Content and Form) Style Manual

Rules governing publications
DI TA Style Manual Need

- Macquarie Dictionary
- Fowler's Modern English Usage
- AGPS Style Manual
- Marketing House Style
- Microsoft Manual of Style
- Open Source Standard Style Manual for Content
- Corporate Form Dictionary

Rules governing publications

How style guides work

- Document the standards and conventions used
- Policed by the manager or editor
- Self-policed by authors themselves
- Example - a style guide might stipulate that:
  - Each topic should have a primary heading that describes the content of the topic.
- DITA's language reference is a type of style guide
- But many requirements can be policed by the validating editor
  - For example, a topic cannot be saved unless it has a title
Interchange

- WOOO
  - Write Once and Once Only
- Company supplying components to manufacturer should supply documentation
- Component document “consumed” by assembly document
- Relies on the same application of the standard
- The DITA standard has gaps

DITA Style Manual

- Supra-organisational semantic mark-up rules
- Important when the formal language rules themselves are open to interpretation
  - <varname> or <apiname>?
  - <term> or <ph> or <keyword>?
- DITA Language Reference is large, technical, and impenetrable for “non-technical” technical authors
- Example – Stem sentence followed by a list
- Authority (eventually) of Style Manual via open source, community ownership
Examples

DI TA Language Reference

- The command (<cmd>) element is required as the first element inside a <step>. It provides the active voice instruction to the user for completing the step, and should not be more than one sentence. If the step needs additional explanation, this can follow the <cmd> element inside an <info> element.
The DITA Style Guide

What element for keystrokes?

The uicontrol element should be used when describing keys on a keyboard, and the userinput element for describing keystrokes that the user must input.

More detailed explanation and tool neutral mark-up examples

Note: Do not use the shortcut element; this element is intended to identify keyboard shortcuts in descriptions of user interface controls in windowed applications.
Potential for controversy

- What if you disagree?
- Paragraphs within list items
- Lists within stem sentence paragraph
- Serial commas
- For example, no punctuation at the end of list items
- Not a matter of right or wrong, but a means of achieving consistency

The DITA Style Guide

- Chapter 1 – Topics and Information Types
- Chapter 2 – DITA Map Files
- Chapter 3 – Syntax and Markup
- Chapter 4 – Language and Punctuation
- Chapter 5 – Graphics and Figures
- Chapter 6 – Cross-referencing
- Chapter 7 – Content Re-use
- Chapter 8 – Metadata and Filtering
- Chapter 9 – Documentation Process
Sudden, abrupt end

Questions, Discussion, Ideas
More information

- www.ditastyle.com
- www.scriptorium.com/books/the-dita-style-guide-best-practices-for-authors/