

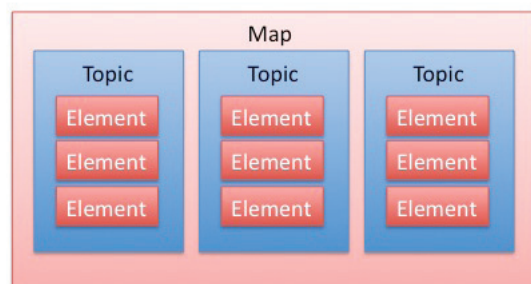
What is DITA?

The basics and benefits of true reuse

By Jim Cain

Content management systems provide the ability to reuse and repurpose content -- author it once, use it in all kinds of products (articles, reports, text books, SOPs, etc.) and in all kinds of channels (print, eLearning, eBook, etc.) for all kinds of purposes (training, sales & marketing collateral, regulatory reporting, etc.) Reuse is a common practice in technical communications, where there is great opportunity to reuse specifications and user instruction across the delivery of user manuals, online help, and user training for a software or hardware product. Today, organizations are looking at how this can be expanded across other areas of the enterprise to get the maximum benefit from their content development efforts (and consistency across their branding).

Traditional authoring applications, designed to create content for a particular delivery mechanism (e.g., online help authoring, desktop publishing), cannot enable true reuse -- the content is too closely tied to its presentation. Rather, you need to develop a framework that enables output-neutral storage of content, searchability for reuse, and the ability to create many output types from the single-source content. Enter the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA).



Quite simply, DITA defines an XML-based information model for document content. This information model consists of a group of common elements (e.g., title, body, section, paragraph, ordered list, unordered list) that can be used to markup a document for a base document type, referred to as a **Topic**. There are no restrictions on how much content can be contained within a single Topic. For example, a Topic can conceivably be an entire chapter of a book, it can be a business document, a section of a document, or as small as a single glossary term and its definition. DITA Topics are authored individually and are aggregated into **Maps**. The Map is used to define which Topics are to be included in generated output and in what order.

A Topic can be referenced in any number of Maps and can be referenced as a sub-topic from within other Topics. In addition, the DITA model also defines a structure called a **conref** (short for content reference). A conref is a way for one Topic to reference an element of another Topic, enabling true reuse of content at the element level.

The ability to reuse content is a major benefit of the DITA information model. Chapters of a book, sections of a business document, or individual glossary terms can be authored once and reused in any number of ways. This enables an organization to reduce the amount of content that is authored while still maintaining the same number of deliverables. Under this model, quality and consistency is improved, efficiencies are gained, and management of revisions is made easier because the content is only authored once.

The fact that DITA is built on XML only creates further benefits with improved searchability (based on both elements and attributes) and support for a greater number of delivery mechanisms (rich print, online, or even mobile). With DITA, you have the ability to author content once and have it delivered to any number of delivery channels.



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