

DITA an Explanation & Comparison

What is DITA

Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) is a method of classifying information by topic type using extensible markup language (XML) for writing, editing and publishing materials. It is a language that can be read and understood by both humans and machines that is architected into a model that states how items are organized, how they interrelate and how they are connected to the real-world (outputs).

With DITA, information is organized by topic, of which there are five main types. The three major types are Tasks, Concepts and Reference topics. There are also Glossary Entries and Troubleshooting topics.

How will it help the team?

Using DITA will help the team by making reusable content possible. Creating documents as one-off outputs, like we have been doing, is time-consuming, with a high probability of errors with versioning, copy/pasting and ownership issues. Topic-based authoring with DITA will streamline documentation, allow for faster document creation and make updating information easier and more efficient by storing the information within a single-source.

3 Potential Authoring Systems:

Component Content Management Systems (CMS) are authoring systems that make using DITA easier for non-programmers. There are multiple options available on the market, I will highlight three of the leading authoring systems for your consideration.

DITA-FMx

DITA-FMx is a “set of plugins and structure applications that provide enhanced authoring and publishing of DITA XML files in FrameMaker” (<http://leximation.com/dita-fmx/>).

Features

Automatic map generation: using a simple tabbed list or text file, users can generate content maps.

File name generation: based on building-block information, automatic file names are generated for projects.

Save View Settings: templates can be customized and saved to allow the author to work with the UI they are comfortable with.

Use of FrameMaker variables in DITA files: FM variables can be carried over into DITA files.

Reference report: all references in the current map can be listed in a generated report.

Graphic Overlays: callouts can be added and are supported within the FM output.

Searchable content: you can search your content based on certain values such as text, elements or attributes.

PDF generation from DITA map: users can generate a PDF FM book of their content map complete with pagination, custom templates, etc.

Easy to use interface: for those familiar with the FM UI, the DITA FMx UI is almost identical.

DITA map editing: content maps can be edited easily by using the drag and drop method.

easyDITA

easyDITA is a DITA authoring system created by Jorsek that allows non-developers to author structured content. It has been identified as one of the most user-friendly DITA authoring options by TechWhirl and has multiple applications for content reuse.

Features

Fast loading and editing: when working in large content maps, easyDITA prioritizes the topics you are looking at, rather than trying to load them all at once. This allows you to work within your content with much faster load times.

Fully collaborative: real-time contribution from multiple authors and team members without slow-downs. Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), writers, reviewers, can all interact at the same time within the same topic.

Ease of use: the UI for easyDITA is not intimidating to non-developers with its interface that resembles the familiar interfaces of Microsoft Word and Google Docs.

Single-source editing: editing within easyDITA occurs within a single source which means that there will be no confusion with versioning as the topic being edited is the standard.

Simultaneous editing: multiple team members can collaborate at the same time and easyDITA indicates who is there working within the topic while you are working.

Editing modes: there are four editing modes available within easyDITA: viewing-only, commenting, suggesting and editing. This allows you to pick the access level that individuals have to the content. For example, a senior manager may only be granted “commenting” access so that they are able to insert their comments but not edit the content.

Real-time validation: within easyDITA, authors can verify and validate the structure without the need to publish. There is also the ability to publish via a WYSIWYG editor as well as a source-code editor. These can be viewed and edited side-by-side.

“Schematron”: easyDITA has a feature called “Schematron” that looks for style guide violations and offers suggestions for fixes.

Topic and submap drag and drop: topics can be rearranged by using the drag and drop method which can save editors time compared to using the source-code to edit.

FrameMaker’s Native DITA Toolset

Adobe FrameMaker is one of the most popular publishing tools used by Technical Writers. It has its own built-in DITA Toolset that allows authors to create structured, topic-based content. As most Technical Writers are familiar with FrameMaker, it is a viable option for DITA publishing.

Features

Simplified XML authoring: users can create their own simplified XML authoring environment by choosing how they would like to view their workspace and how they would like topics generated with either free-form authoring or guided authoring.

Free-Form Authoring: this is authoring done by using the structure view along with the WYSIWYG editor.

Guided Authoring: this is authoring done using “out of the box” forms available for DITA.

Multiple Views: users can choose to work in the WYSIWYG editor, the structure view, the element catalog or the forms view.

Alerts: alerts can be setup to let the user know when they are entering content within the wrong element. It can also be setup to automatically switch the user to the correct element.

Tags: the user can turn tags on so that the current element gets highlighted within the structure view, this allows to user to easily find where they are within the topic’s structure.

Quick Element Toolbar: the toolbar is helpful for editing common features within the topics. The items on the toolbar switch depending on the type of topic you are working in.

Drag and drop building: users can build content using the drag and drop method, FM will not allow the user to perform an invalid drop.

Tool Comparison Chart

This chart outlines the pros and cons of each DITA Authoring System.

Tool	Pros	Cons
DITA-FMx	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Works seamlessly with FM - Easily customizable by developers - 100% compliant DITA files - Multiple viewing/editing modes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Harder to work with for non-developers - Must have knowledge of and access to FM to use - Complicated to install - Steep learning curve - Editing cannot be done in real-time - Expensive - \$3,525 yearly
easyDITA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easy to use for non-developers - Editing can be done in real-time - Multiple editors can access the document at the same time - Editing modes can be chosen to grant or restrict certain access privileges - Easier collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Must learn another tool in addition to FM - Expensive - \$3,333 per month for the enterprise plan, billed yearly
FM – Native DITA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Native to FM, one of the most-used publishing tools - Available at no extra cost when you have FM - Multiple viewing/editing modes - XML files work with other authoring tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Editing cannot be done in real-time - Multiple users cannot access the topics at the same time - Must have knowledge of working within FM

My Recommendation & Reasoning:

After analysing the three authoring tools above, I would recommend we use easyDITA. Although the cost of easyDITA is significantly higher than the other options, it provides a much more robust set of features that will work well with our needs. In particular, the ability to have multiple authors, SMEs and reviewers working at the same time, with set editing privileges will allow us to write, edit and publish content faster than with the other options.

Impact of Adopting DITA

Adopting DITA will have a significantly positive effect on our future projects and plans. From a content management perspective, adopting DITA will make all of our content searchable, it will make us aware of the content we have, and it will result in consistent documentation with a high level of quality control. Additionally, the benefit of only having to update information in one location and have it automatically update in all other instances, is one that will save the company valuable time and money.

From a workflow perspective, customers are now used to (and expect to get) information immediately, on every device they own, exactly how they'd like to see it. Adapting DITA will allow us to create documentation faster, more efficiently and responsive on all devices, all from a single-source.

From a reuse perspective, we will save money and time by creating one source for overlapping content that can be generated for multiple audiences.

From a translation and localization perspective, we will save money and time by having the ability to send smaller topics for translation rather than full, large documents. Additionally, if changes are made to future versions, only the changed topics need to be sent to translation, not full documents.

Overall, adopting DITA will save money and time and will result in consistent, reusable content that will reflect well on the company.

Moving Forward with a Unified Content Strategy

As per our mandate of moving towards a unified content strategy, using easyDITA will prove an invaluable tool. It will allow us to create content from a single source: write once, review once, edit once, translate and localize once and then reuse everywhere. DITA is the means by which unified content is possible, we should adopt DITA, use easyDITA as our authoring tool and move to a more sophisticated, consistent, reusable content development strategy.

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