



Book Review – The DITA Style Guide

by Tony Self, reviewed by Sue Woolley

Overview

I have to admit up front – I am not a DITA girl. I would love to be, as a former programmer, but in many years as a technical communicator, I have never worked for anyone enlightened enough to consider something as ‘out there’ as DITA. So I opened Tony Self’s book with a bit of trepidation.

Not having used DITA, I can’t comment on the technical accuracy of the content. However, knowing Tony as I do, I have no doubt that every I is dotted and every T crossed.

I have attended a number of presentations at conferences and ASTC technical meetings where Tony has talked about DITA. Based on my first impressions it would have been easy to dismiss it as “new-fangled” and think “it’ll never catch on”. However, I vividly remember thinking exactly that about a presentation Tony did about e-readers several years ago. Enough said!

Book concept

The aim of this book is not to be a language reference, but to be a style guide in the manner of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. The goal is to promote consistency and best practice for the mark-up, writing style, naming and structure of DITA documents. This book fills the gap between the *DITA Language Reference* and the author. For an author, just knowing the syntactical elements of a language is not enough to write effectively and well. The book is not a teaching guide. It is aimed at people who are already working with DITA. It also assumes a working knowledge of XML.

For DITA-challenged people like me, the Appendix offers some background. In addition to running through a bit of the history of how DITA came about, it describes one fundamental concept you must understand before embarking on a DITA project—separating content and form. This sounds very simple, but you may need time to get your head around it if DITA is new to you.

The book is not specific to any particular authoring tool and provides practical examples throughout. The book is, of course, written using DITA.

Structure

The book is 248 pages long, and, in addition to the Appendix just described, contains an introduction, and nine chapters:

- Chapter 1 – Information types and topics
- Chapter 2 – DITA map files
- Chapter 3 – Syntax and mark-up
- Chapter 4 – Language and punctuation
- Chapter 5 – Graphics and figures
- Chapter 6 – Cross-referencing
- Chapter 7 – Content re-use
- Chapter 8 – Metadata, conditional processing and indexing
- Chapter 9 – The DITA documentation process

Chapter 1

Because DITA is all about *structured* authoring, Chapter

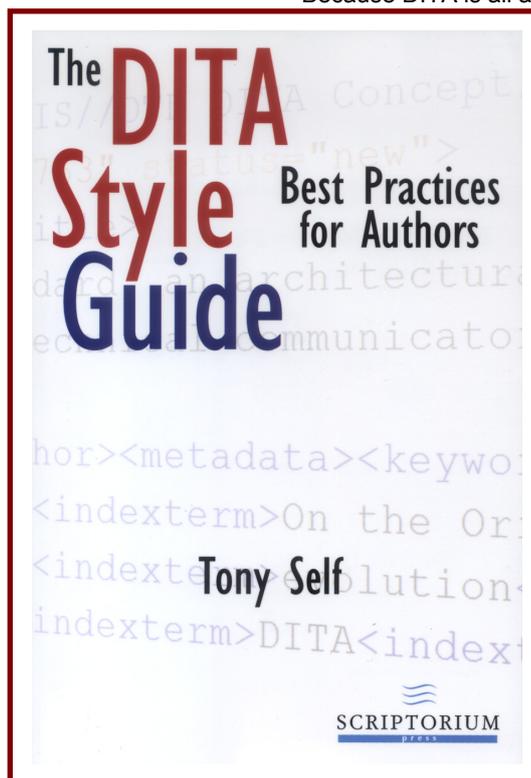
1 discusses the concepts of information types and topics. In particular, it talks about analysing your content model to work out what types of topics you need, and most importantly, working out what type of information you are trying to convey. It is essential to give a lot of thought up front to the way your information will be structured before putting “pen to paper”.

Chapter 2

The DITA map defines the way in which topics are published, defines the heading levels, table of contents, navigation and links between topics. This ensures that the content can be separated from the output format(s).

Chapter 3

This chapter on DITA syntax and mark-up is the longest in the book. It contains a concise description of each of the DITA elements along with helpful examples. This includes working with mark-up, element domains, short descriptions, lists, paragraphs, procedures and steps, tables, phrases and special characters and dates.



Chapter 4

The chapter on language and punctuation discusses the importance of using these correctly in your content to ensure consistency. This particularly applies to stem sentences, lists, titles and headings. The book constantly emphasises the need to think about re-use when punctuating text to give the maximum flexibility. The other main emphasis of this chapter is to make sure no output formatting creeps into your content—for example, a forced line break in a title or a label such as “Note”.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 describes comprehensively how to use graphics and figures, covering what image file formats DITA supports, how to place and size graphics, how to cater for different graphics in different output formats and how to include multimedia objects in your online output.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 provides a wide-ranging guide to creating and using internal cross-references to topics, paragraphs, sections, steps, figures, tables and other DITA elements and external references such as web addresses.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 focuses on writing content for re-use and how to organise topics and elements so that they can be used in multiple places effectively.

Chapter 8

This chapter describes conditional processing concepts so that you can include or exclude content during the publishing process. Conditional processing in DITA is achieved by using metadata attributes to filter or flag portions of the content.

The chapter also describes how to create an index using *indexterm* elements (similar to the XE fields in Word).

Chapter 9

The final chapter describes the DITA documentation process, including the documentation stages, recommendations for file naming conventions and folder structures and the publishing process.

Summary

I believe that this book will very quickly become an essential companion to the *DITA Language Reference* for all authors who use DITA. It is comprehensive, well written and laid out and, wherever there is any doubt about how to do something, it outlines the best practice. It is written specifically for authors, and always makes a point of telling you what approaches to avoid and why. My only negative comment is that the index could be more useful.

Book Details

The DITA Style Guide: Best Practices for Authors
by Tony Self.

ISBN: 9780982811818

Publisher: Scriptorium Press, 2011

The cover price of the printed book is US\$35.95, but some Internet bookstores offer a discounted price and promotions such as free shipping.

The book is also available as a Kindle download and in an ePUB version, both US\$9.99.

More information at: <http://ditastyle.com/>.

About the author

Tony Self has been involved in documentation for 30 years. He is a member of the OASIS DITA Technical Committee and DITA Adoption Technical Committee, and chairs the Help Subcommittee.

Tony recently gained the degree of PhD from Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. Tony’s research addressed the question of what constitutes best practice in DITA, the “artefact” being this book.

In 2011, Tony was awarded the Horace Hockley award by the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) in the UK for his services to the technical publication community.

Tony intends to donate the content and intellectual property of *The DITA Style Guide* to the DITA community.

Tony’s business website is www.hyperwrite.com.au.

What is DITA?

DITA stands for Darwin Information Typing Architecture.

Like DocBook, DITA is a “flavour” of XML, specifically designed for writing and publishing technical documents and online help files. It is an XML-based open standard originally developed by IBM. In 2004 they donated their DITA work to the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (OASIS) for further development and release to the public. The current version of DITA is 1.2.

Why Darwin?

The ‘Darwin’ in ‘Darwin Information Typing Architecture’ is named after the naturalist, Charles Darwin. As part of his theory of evolution, he found that plants and animals can inherit traits from their parents. In DITA, many elements inherit *attributes* from parent elements.