



Writing. In Small. Chunks.

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Writing. In Small. Chunks.

Chunk 1: Before we start.

Chunk 2: Concepts.

Chunk 3: Writers' block.

Chunk 4: Commercial.

○(Acknowledgements throughout to Michael Priestley and others at IBM who devised DITA, and continue to be involved in developing and refining it)



Chunk 1

Before we start

- what's a markup language?
- what do technical writers want?



Markup languages

- Use tags to describe text
(`<h1></h1>`)
- Use rules to control the use of tags
(DTD)
- Stylesheets map tags to display
properties (CSS)
- Methods of mapping tags or
structures to other tags and
structures (XSLT)



“Single-sourcing” and “Re-use”

- “Holy Grail” for technical writers:
 - Write once
 - Publish multiple times
- Single-sourcing = same information in multiple presentation formats – some conditionality
- Re-use = same information in different publications – complex conditionality



Problems with single-sourcing

- “Dumping” books online doesn’t work
- Customisations are difficult to undo
- Need to repeat all conversion processes every time there’s an update



Chunk 2

Concepts

- XML for technical authors
- DITA



Potential of XML

- Standard for defining markup languages
- Theoretically useful
 - Separate form from content
 - Describe content with tags
 - Conform to a standard



Problems with XML

- DTDs tend to be book-based
- DTDs take time and effort to create
- Technical publications have a very short life span



Where did DITA come from?

- Developed at IBM “to make life easier for technical writers, and to enable content re-use”
- Previous widespread use of markup with SGML and XML
- To be useful, markup was specific, hence more difficult to share, and more expensive

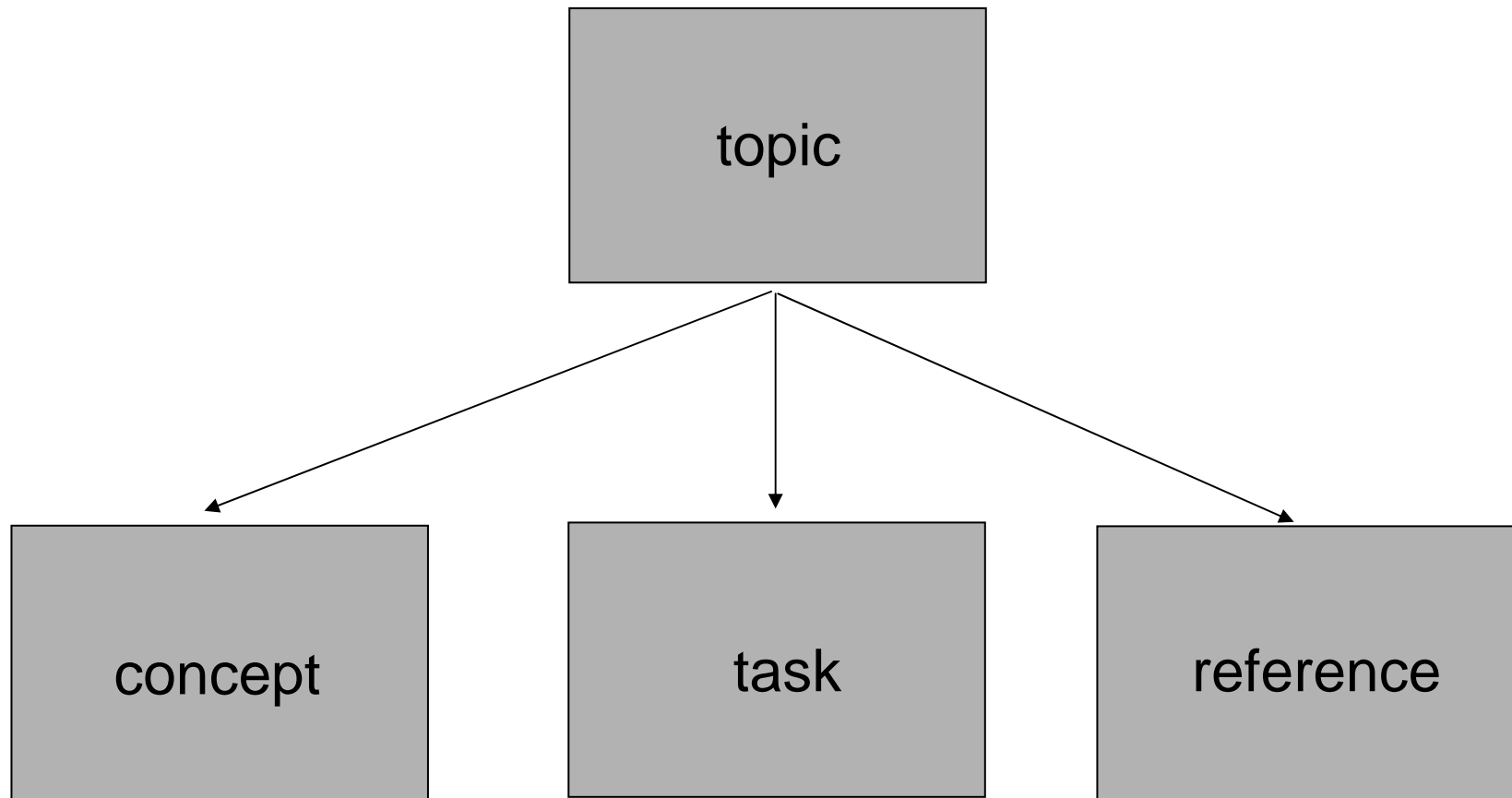


What is DITA?

- Darwin Information Typing Architecture
- Darwin
 - Uses principles of inheritance for specialisation
- Information Typing
 - Uses three basic kinds of topic: Concept, Task, and Reference
- Architecture
 - A model for extending design and processes



Core DITA topic types

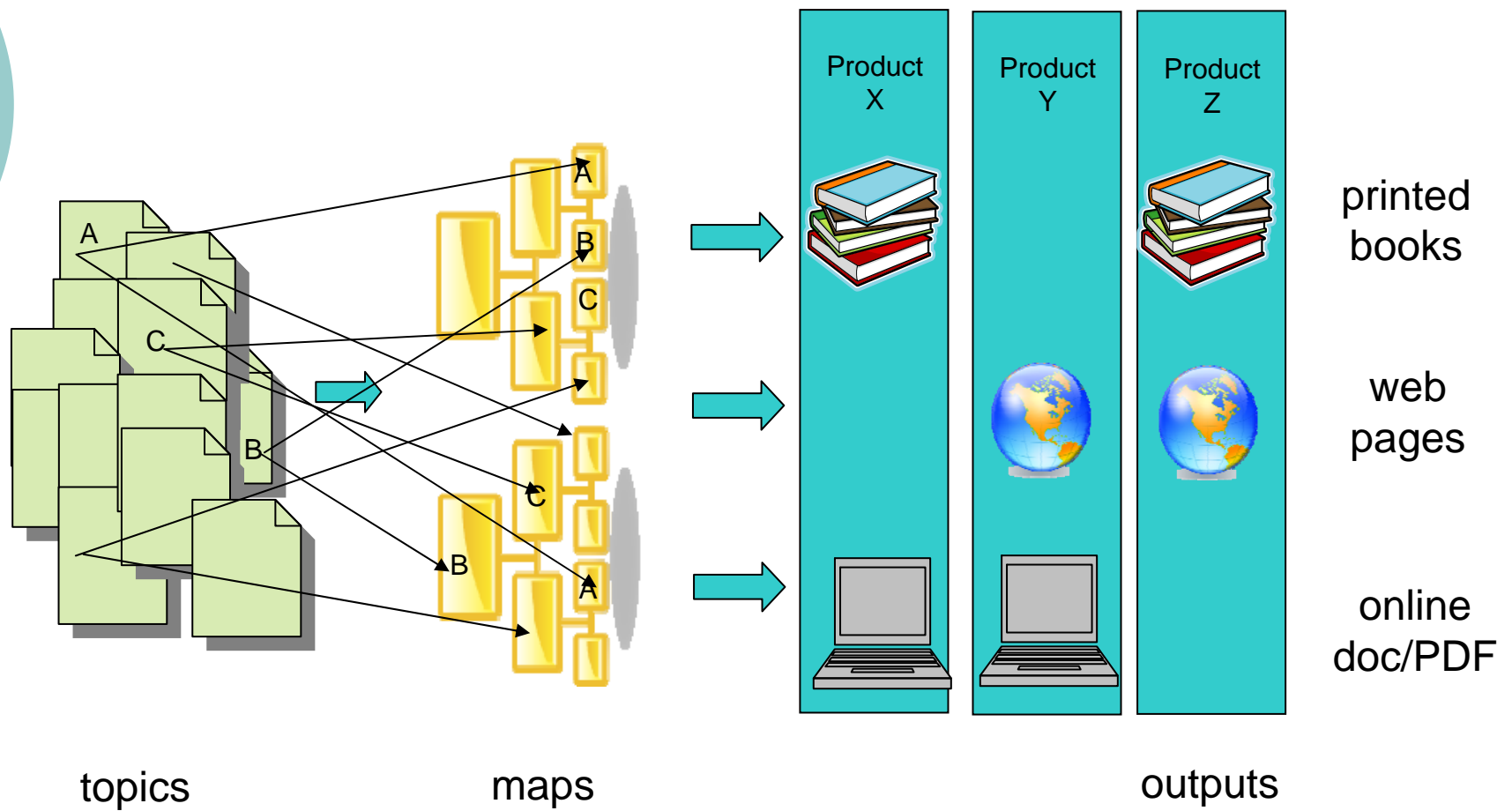




DITA specialisation

- Specialisation from core Topic
- Each specialisation is a design delta
 - Task is a specialisation of Topic
 - Business Task is a specialisation of Task
 - Sales Business Task is a specialisation of Business Task
- Processing can also be specialised

Re-use of DITA topics with DITA maps





Where is DITA now

- Open-source OASIS standard
 - Technical Committee and subcommittees
- DITA Open Toolkit
- DITA Maturity Model
 - six levels of adoption and integration building a semantic ecosystem
- Online user communities
- Conferences
- Commercial tools



Chunk 3

Writers' Block

- what tools or techniques could help technical writers?



Goals for technical writers

- Re-use content for efficiency, accuracy, consistency, and cost savings
- Focus on getting the content correct, rather than on “font fondling” and “format fixing”



Topic-based approaches

- Help systems and help tools
- Information Mapping
- 'Database' publishing
 - example: Author-it™



Paradigm Shift for Authors (1)

- Pre-1970s: writing, editing, typography, typesetting each required different professionals
- Pre-1980s: automation of production processes
- WIMP PC era/DTP era – WYSIWYG
- XML authoring – a return to separate professions?

- (Acknowledgements to Sarah O’Keefe, Scriptorium Publishing)



Paradigm Shift for Authors (2)

- Not WYSIWYG but WYSIOO
 - (What you see is one option)
- Loss of control
 - Presentation format
 - Content organisation



“Old school”

- WYSIWYG
- Templates optional
- (Styles optional)
- Layouts tweakable
- Writing Chapters
- Some conditional markup possible
- Familiar environment
- Mature products



“New World Order”

- WYSIOW
- Templates mandatory
- No tweaking allowed
- Writing chunks
- Complex metadata
- New challenges
- Tools are all quite new



XML is “good” for managers

- Control over
 - Content
 - Costs
- Reuse leads to efficiency leads to savings



Sidebar on Content Management

- In many organisations, content management projects have by-passed the content creation specialists
- DITA can enable component content management
- Content Management and DITA are completely independent but when they come together the returns can be huge
- In the Tech Comms world leading content management practitioners are spearheading the DITA adoption movement



XML is “bad” for writers

- Less control of content organization
- No control of formatting
- Poor tools
- Other people get the benefits



But XML might be “good” for writers because...

- No more formatting headaches
- Consistent content
- Complex re-use
- Learn new tools and technologies
- Moving into new roles



Reports from the field (1)

- DITA makes some things easier but isn't a "magic wand"
- Take great care in choosing a tool that meets your business needs – tech writers may need help to do this
- Develop a solid business case – with measurable goals – before you start
- (Acknowledgements to Scott Abel, The Content Wrangler)



Reports from the field (2)

- Can all your writers actually write reusable content?
- Converting legacy documents is a serious issue
- DITA specialisation is tempting but might not be necessary
- Allow plenty of time for planning, training, and getting up to speed



Tools today

- Tools are improving all the time
- Several tools successfully hide the DITA infrastructure from your technical writers (so you need some techie staff to help them)
- Tools are available for Linux and Windows
- User communities are active and growing



Conclusions

- Moving to DITA requires planning and investment both on the macro level and the micro level
- Many authors remain sceptical because the change in their working habits is so profound
- XML/DITA benefits are long term but can be considerable




Chunk 4

Commercial
- DITA Exchange for MOSS



DITA Exchange

- web-based using Microsoft SharePoint Server 2007 (MOSS)
 - form editor – hides code from writers
 - uses MOSS's content management features
- 
- DITA Exchange™**
by Content Technologies
- rapid implementation – faster RoI
 - coming soon – OBA for Microsoft Word 2007



Acknowledgements and References

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- Sarah O'Keefe
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- DITA Exchange
<http://www.farbey.co.uk/dita-exch.htm>

Thank you



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