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Introduction

About *The DITA Style Guide*

The DITA Style Guide: Best Practices for Authors is designed to help DITA authors implement DITA consistently by providing an authoritative reference (in the same way that *The Chicago Manual of Style* provides a reference for matters of language, writing and presentational style).

Some rules and recommendations may be controversial or contentious, and you may not agree with them. However, the purpose of *The DITA Style Guide* is to make a “ruling” one way or the other, so that at least a consistent approach can be adopted.

The DITA Style Guide is written for the DITA base content model, and not for specializations. (The nature of specialization would make it impossible to write usage rules!)

The DITA Style Guide is not an exhaustive set of rules or guidelines; it addresses the most common questions that DITA users ask, based on analysis of the *Yahoo! DITA Users Group* mailing list.

The DITA Style Guide is not authoring-tool specific, so by necessity it uses neutral code examples, rather than examples of what might appear in a *WYSIOO* editor, or other tool-specific interactions. There are many practical examples, most built around a fictitious car manual.

Style guides are often arranged alphabetically, but *The DITA Style Guide* is arranged into nine chapters covering different aspects of DITA markup. It is intended to be referenced, rather than read (it’s not a “good read”), so the index is comprehensive.

The DITA Style Guide is not intended to teach you about DITA, and is aimed at people already working in a DITA environment. It assumes a working knowledge of XML principles, such as the way elements and attributes work.

The DITA Style Guide is specifically intended to be used in conjunction with, or as a supplement to, the *DITA Language Reference*, and not as an

alternative to it. The online version of *The DITA Style Guide* will have links to the *DITA Language Reference*.

In the medium term, it is planned that *The DITA Style Guide* will become an open source community resource, probably in the form of a DITA-based Wiki.

The DITA Style Guide was written in DITA 1.1, and mostly follows its own recommendations! However, it's almost certain that mistakes were made, despite best efforts to eliminate them. For changes and errata, please visit <http://www.ditastyle.com/>.

The role of a style guide

The primary purpose of a style guide is to promote consistency. Style guides also aim to codify best practice. What the term *best practice* actually means is not universally understood or agreed. Understanding what constitutes best practice in DITA is made more challenging by the difficulty in finding agreed practices in this field, let alone best practice. Something as simple as whether paragraphs should exist within list items is not clear-cut.

A *style manual or style guide* is a set of standards governing the design and writing of documents, and usually takes the form of a printed manual. Publishing organizations, standards bodies, government agencies and publication departments within an organization are the typical originators of style manuals. Technical publication style manuals used by technical communicators, such as the *AGPS Manual of Style* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, devote a number of chapters to the publishing process, which, in the DITA model, is removed from the technical communicator's domain. Conversely, very little space is devoted to the semantic identification of content elements, something that is core in DITA. The major purpose of a style manual is to promote consistency, and one of the difficulties of DITA adoption is working without a style guide appropriate to the DITA paradigm.

It is just as easy to lazily create poorly marked-up DITA documents as it is to create poorly styled word processing documents. To maximise the opportunities of DITA, it is important that the semantic elements are applied consistently across a publications department, and indeed across the DITA authoring community. *The DITA Style Guide* is intended to

serve as an authoritative reference that defines a best practice conventions for mark-up, writing style, naming, and structure.

Conventions used in this book

Some text in this book uses special formatting:

Italics Highlights terms and titles.

Monospace font Highlights element names, attribute names, and code.

Text with a gray vertical bar indicates unequivocal rules for writing DITA content.

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