

Art of the short description

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Who I am

- Information architect and DITA educator
- Member of the DITA Technical Committee and the Editorial Board for dita.xml.org
- Previously worked seven years on contract at IBM
- Personal interests:
 - Usability
 - Thoughtfully managing the planning and cultural aspects of DITA migrations
 - Developing hands-on and practical DITA education

Assumptions

- Some knowledge of DITA
- Interested in the online output generated by the DITA Toolkit
- Two audiences:
 - People without knowledge of what a short description is – or what benefit it can serve
 - People who want to create more effective short descriptions

Agenda

1. What is a short description?
2. How `<shortdesc>` in DITA topics is processed by the DITA Toolkit
3. Short descriptions and usability
4. Guidelines for short descriptions
 - a) Task topics
 - b) Concept topics
 - c) Reference topics
5. `<shortdesc>` in DITA maps
6. How using short descriptions can affect content and architecture
7. Summary

What is a short description?

- The content of an optional element: <shortdesc>
- Provides a short overview of the topic, its content, and why it matters
- It is valid in two main locations
 - Map level
 - Topic level

Where <shortdesc> is valid

Within a topic

concept id="plaque_c" xml:lang="en-us"

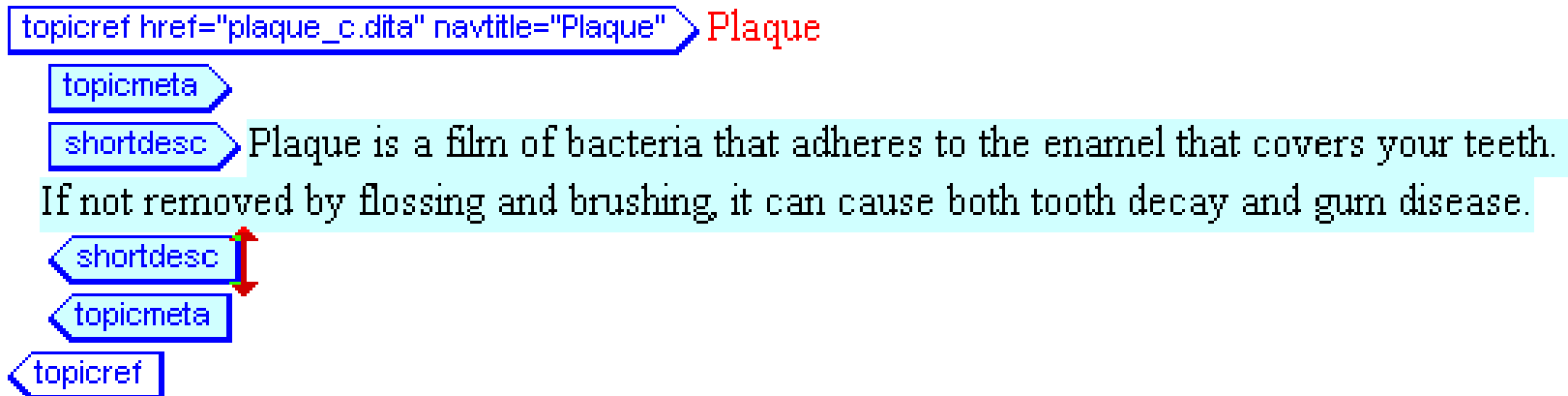
Plaque

Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.

Your mouth is a busy place. Bacteria – tiny colonies of living organisms – are constantly on the move on your teeth, gums, lips and tongue. Certain types of bacteria, however, attach themselves to hard surfaces like the enamel that covers your teeth. If they're not removed, they multiply and grow in number until a colony forms. More bacteria of different types attach to the colony already growing on the tooth enamel. Proteins that are present in your saliva mix in and the bacteria colony becomes a whitish film on the tooth. This film is called *plaque*.

Where <shortdesc> is valid

Within a DITA map



Where the <shortdesc> content is displayed

First paragraph of a topic

Plaque

Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.

Your mouth is a busy place. Bacteria – tiny colonies of living organisms – are constantly on the move on your teeth, gums, lips and tongue. Certain types of bacteria,



Where the <shortdesc> content is displayed

Automatically-generated topic preview

Concepts

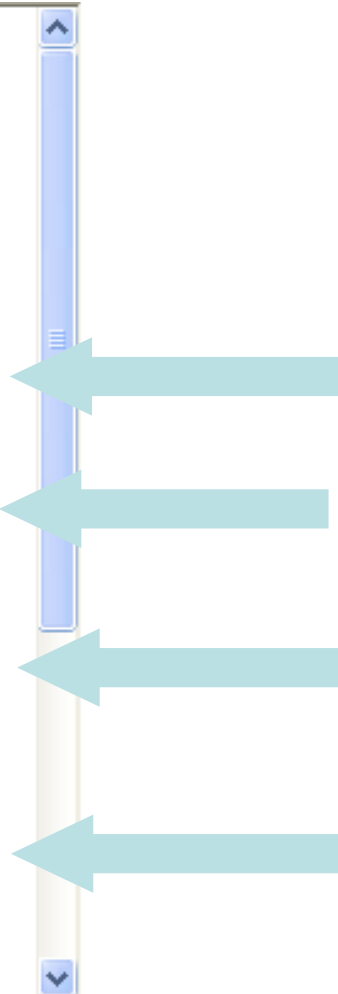
This section discusses concepts that will help you understand how to properly care for your teeth.

Cavities
Cavities (or dental caries) are caused by acid erosion of tooth enamel.

Gingivitis
Gingivitis is an inflammation of the gums. It is a form of periodontal disease that is caused by the long-term effects of plaque deposits.

Periodontal disease
Periodontal diseases are serious gum infections that, left untreated, can lead to tooth loss.

Plaque
Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.



Where the <shortdesc> content is displayed

Topic previews are generated by

- ◆ Nesting in the DITA map
- ◆ Content of the <title> and <shortdesc> in DITA file

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="utf-8"?>
<!DOCTYPE map PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Map//EN" "map.dtd">
<map title="Dental tips">
<topicref href="concepts_c.dita" navtitle="Concepts">
  <topicref href="cavities_c.dita"></topicref>
  <topicref href="gingivitis_c.dita"></topicref>
  <topicref href="periodontal_disease_c.dita"></topicref>
  <topicref href="plaque_c.dita"></topicref>
</topicref>
</map>
```

```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="utf-8"?>
<!DOCTYPE concept PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Concept//EN" "concept.dtd">
<concept id="concepts_c" xml:lang="en-us">
  <title>Concepts</title>
  <shortdesc>This section discusses concepts that will help you
  understand how to properly care for your teeth.</shortdesc>
<conbody></conbody>
</concept>
```

Where the <shortdesc> content is displayed

Result

Concepts

This section discusses concepts that will help you understand how to properly care for your teeth.

[Cavities](#)
Cavities (or dental caries) are caused by acid erosion of tooth enamel.

[Gingivitis](#)
Gingivitis is an inflammation of the gums. It is a form of periodontal disease that is caused by the long-term effects of plaque deposits.

[Periodontal disease](#)
Periodontal diseases are serious gum infections that, left untreated, can lead to tooth loss.

[Plaque](#)
Plaque is a film of bacteria that adheres to the enamel that covers your teeth. If not removed by flossing and brushing, it can cause both tooth decay and gum disease.

Where the <shortdesc> content is displayed

- Pop-up text over a link
- Full short description displayed in CHM; truncated in Eclipse help in some browsers

Parent topic: [What are the Derby tools and utilities?](#)

Related concepts

[Overview](#)

[About Derby databases](#)

[JDBC basics](#)

Terms of Use Most of the Derby tools are JDBC applications. A JDBC application is one that uses the cl...

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IBM Cloudscape Version 10.1

A progressive disclosure device

How the content of `<shortdesc>` is used – and the value for the reader

- First paragraph
 - Thesis statement
 - Users can quickly access whether content is useful to them
- Generated links
 - Summary of content
 - Helps readers navigate successfully without massive scanning of content
- Hover text
 - Gives the user more information than is in the title
 - Limited to approximately 25 words in Eclipse output

DITA Toolkit guidelines

- Single, concise paragraph.
- Contains one or two sentences of no more than 50 words.
- Use complete sentences, except for very short topics such as APIs.
- If a topic contains only one paragraph, include the text in the `<shortdesc>`.

Guidelines for ALL topics

Don't ...

- Restate the title
- State the obvious, for example, “You can use XYZ to do A”
- Start the short description with phrases such as “This topic describes ...” or “This topic is about ...”
- Use the short description as a lead-in to or build-up that does not stand on its own as a complete information entity.

Guidelines for task topics

Do ...

- Explain what the task helps the users accomplish
 - Answer the question: “What are the benefits of the task?”
 - Answer the question: “What is the purpose of the task?”
- Include information about when the users should perform the task or why the task is necessary
- (If applicable) Include information about who should perform the task and where it should be performed

Examples: Task topics

Ineffective

Changing data types

You can use the ALTER NICKNAME statement to change the data type of a column.

Effective

Changing data types

You can change the data type of a column so that your data types are consistent across tables. Use the ALTER NICKNAME statement to change the data type of a column.

Guidelines for concept topics

Do ...

- Introduce the concept and provide a concise answer to the question "What is this?" and (if needed) "Why do I care about this?"
- Start with a brief definition, if the concept is unfamiliar.
- Make sure that the short description contains the main point of the topic.

Examples : Concept topics

Ineffective

Crawlers

This topic is about crawlers, which are programs that search for information.

Effective

Crawlers

Crawlers are programs that search for information on the Web, in databases, or in other data sources. The information that the crawlers gather is added to the search engine index. Crawlers must run regularly to ensure that the search engine index is up to date.

Guidelines for reference topics

Do ...

- Explain the following points:
 - What an item is
 - What the item does
 - What the item is used for
- Use consistent phrasing across libraries so that your information can be easily integrated with another product's information.

Examples: Reference topics

Ineffective

COUNT command

DB2 Universal Database provides a COUNT command.

Effective

COUNT command

The COUNT command displays the current number of rows in the table. The rows are counted by the SQL SELECT COUNT(*) function.

<shortdesc> in a DITA map

- Can override the contents of the <shortdesc> located in a topic
- Only has this functionality for links

`topicref href="brushing_your_teeth_t.dita" navtitle="Brushing your teeth" >Brushing your teeth`

topicmeta

shortdesc

This text is located in a <shortdesc> element in the DITA map. It overrides the content of the <shortdesc> located in a topic, but only in the generated links.

shortdesc

topicmeta

topicref

Tasks

Brushing and flossing your teeth properly can prevent cavities, gingivitis, and periodontal disease. These dental problems cause at least one-third of adult tooth loss.

Brushing your teeth

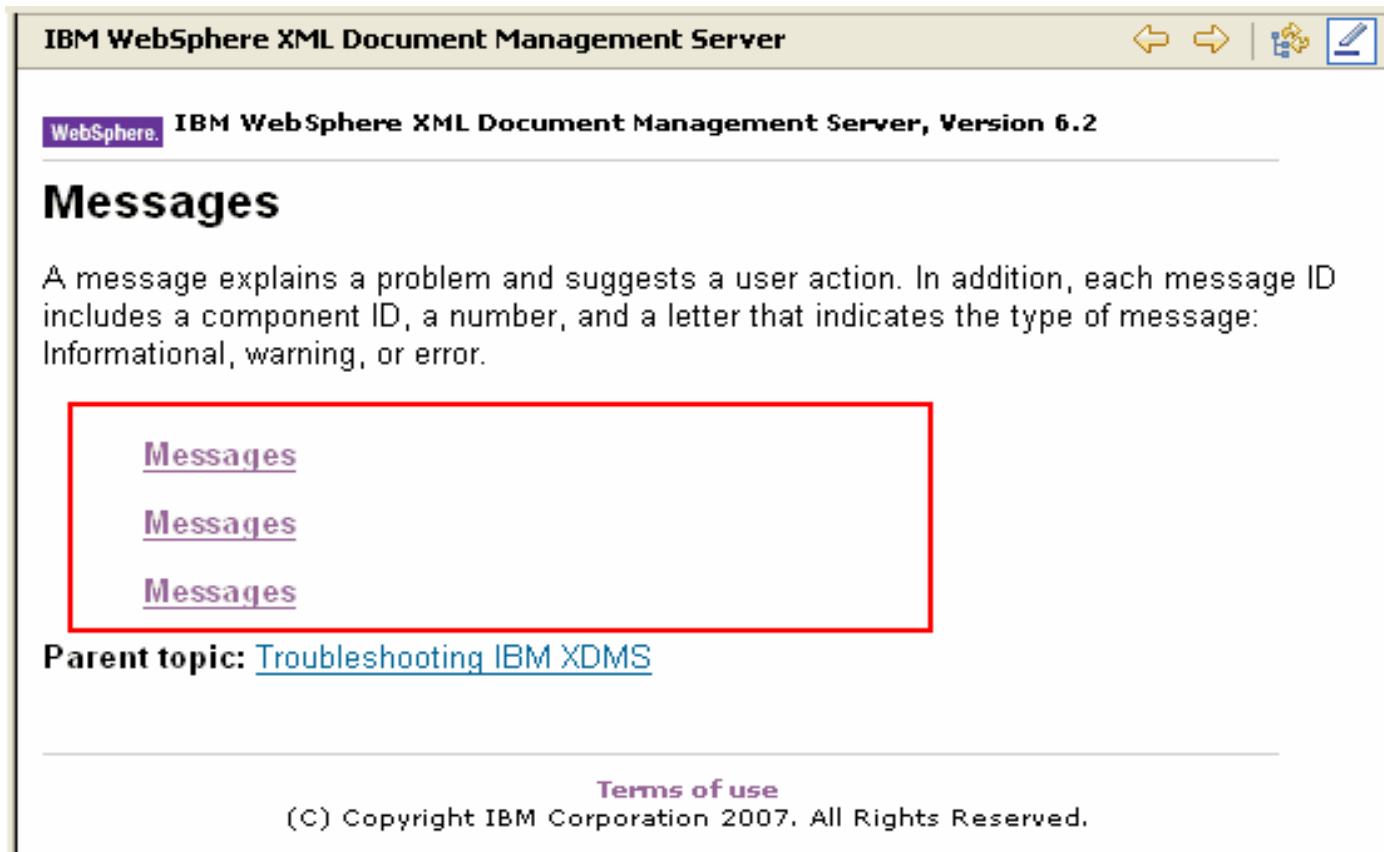
This text is located in a <shortdesc> element in the DITA map. It overrides the content of the <shortdesc> located in a topic, but only in the generated links.

Flossing your teeth

Flossing your teeth removes food debris and plaque that lodge between the teeth and under the gum line.

<shortdesc> in a DITA map

Before



IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server

WebSphere. IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server, Version 6.2

Messages

A message explains a problem and suggests a user action. In addition, each message ID includes a component ID, a number, and a letter that indicates the type of message: Informational, warning, or error.

[Messages](#)

[Messages](#)

[Messages](#)

Parent topic: [Troubleshooting IBM XDMS](#)

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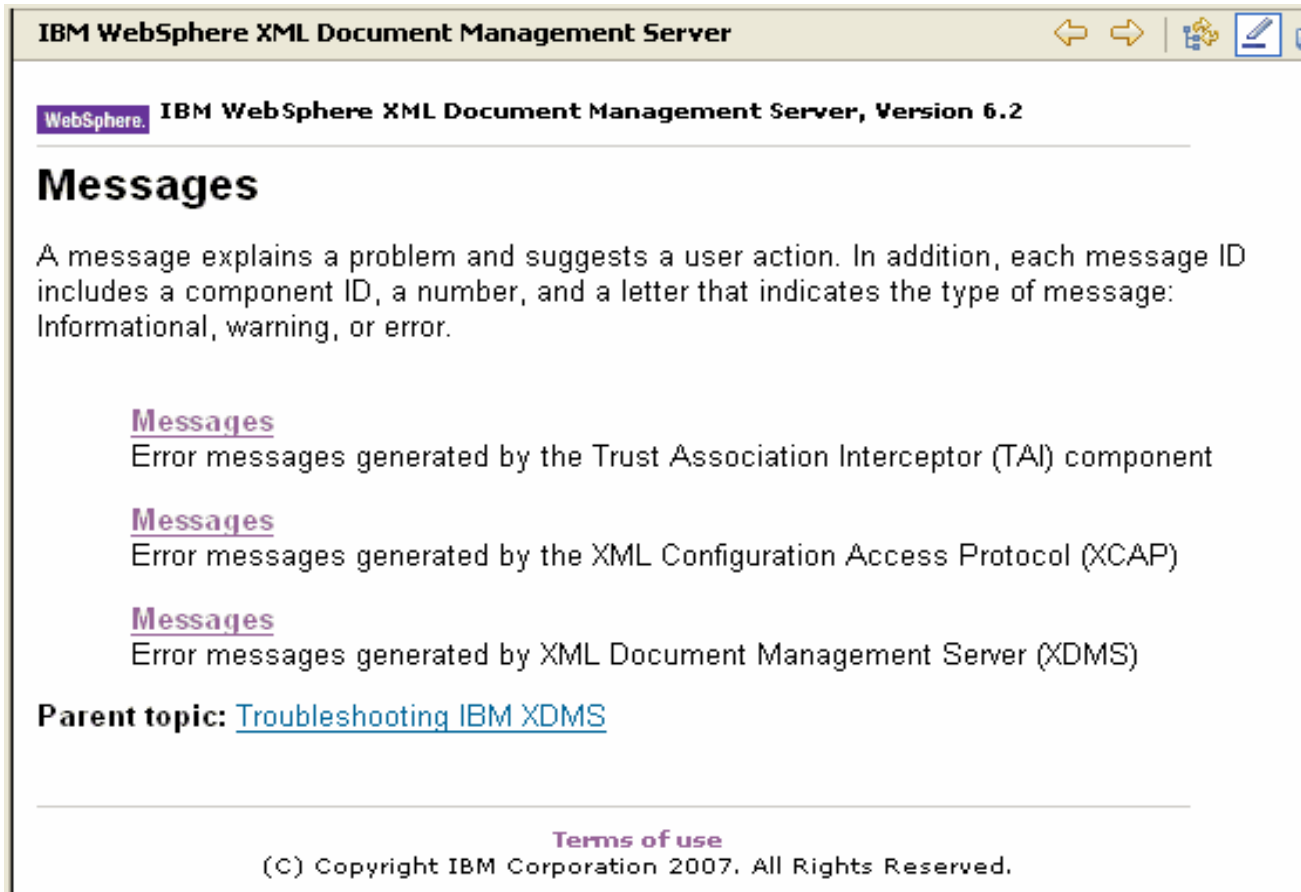
<shortdesc> in a DITA map

Modify the DITA map

```
...
<topicref href="com_msg_intro_c.dita" navtitle="Messages">
  <topicref href="TAIMsgs.dita" navtitle="TAI error messages">
    <topicmeta>
      <shortdesc>Error messages generated by the Trust Association Interceptor (TAI)
      component</shortdesc>
    </topicmeta>
  </topicref>
  <topicref href="XcapErrorMsgs.dita" navtitle="XCAP error messages">
    <topicmeta>
      <shortdesc>Error messages generated by the XML Configuration Access Protocol
      (XCAP)</shortdesc>
    </topicmeta>
  </topicref>
  <topicref href="XDMSErrorMsgs.dita" navtitle="XDMS error messages">
    <topicmeta>
      <shortdesc>Error messages generated by XML Document Management Server (XDMS)</shortdesc>
    </topicmeta>
  </topicref>
</topicref>
...
```

<shortdesc> in a DITA map

After



The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server". The page content includes a breadcrumb "WebSphere. IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server, Version 6.2", a main heading "Messages", a paragraph explaining message IDs, three sub-sections each titled "Messages" with descriptions of error messages from different components, a "Parent topic" link, and a footer with "Terms of use" and copyright information.

IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server

WebSphere. IBM WebSphere XML Document Management Server, Version 6.2

Messages

A message explains a problem and suggests a user action. In addition, each message ID includes a component ID, a number, and a letter that indicates the type of message: Informational, warning, or error.

Messages
Error messages generated by the Trust Association Interceptor (TAI) component

Messages
Error messages generated by the XML Configuration Access Protocol (XCAP)

Messages
Error messages generated by XML Document Management Server (XDMS)

Parent topic: [Troubleshooting IBM XDMS](#)

[Terms of use](#)
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Writing short descriptions affects ...

Content

- Writing good short descriptions is a difficult and time-consuming task.
- Forces writers to clarify what is the main point or thesis of a topic.
- Iterative process.
- Once a good short description is crafted, often the hardest work is done.

Writing short descriptions affects ...

Information architecture

- Can lead to reassessing granularity and scope
- If <shortdesc> doesn't add value, is the topic really needed?
- If <shortdesc> can't be adequately contained in a few sentences, are you trying to do too much in a single topic?

Summary

Short descriptions ...

- An elegant progressive-disclosure device
- Interesting intersection
 - Structured authoring techniques
 - Topic-based writing
 - Old-fashioned principles of effective writing
- Can dramatically improve the following:
 - Quality of content and architecture
 - Usability of an information set
- Large benefit for a small expense

Resources

DITA Open Toolkit documentation

- `<shortdesc>`
http://dita-ot.sourceforge.net/doc/ot-userguide13/xhtml/core_vocabulary/short_description.html
- `<abstract>`
http://dita-ot.sourceforge.net/doc/ot-userguide13/xhtml/release_current/abstract_element.html

Resources

OASIS, DITA Version 1.1, Language Specification

- `<shortdesc>`
<http://docs.oasis-open.org/dita/v1.1/CS01/langspec/langref/shortdesc.html>
- `<abstract>`
<http://docs.oasis-open.org/dita/v1.1/CS01/langspec/langref/abstract.html>

Resources

- dita-users group on Yahoo!
- *Developing Quality Technical Information: A Handbook for Writers and Editors* (2nd edition, 2004)
- dita.xml.org

Questions and comments?

Acknowledgments

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And to Elliot Kimber for making me think about travel guides and DITA



Feedback

- Any suggestions for improving this session are greatly appreciated.
- Let me know what guidelines your company or team has for short descriptions.
- Send me examples of both good and bad short descriptions.
- Contact information:

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