

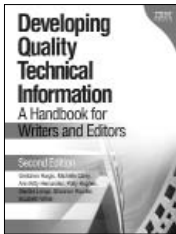
DITA Best Practices

A Roadmap for Writing, Editing,
and Architecting in DITA

Laura Bellamy, Michelle Carey, Jenifer Schlotfeldt



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Figure 5.4 shows how a well-written short description can help users who are searching for information determine whether they've found the information that they want.

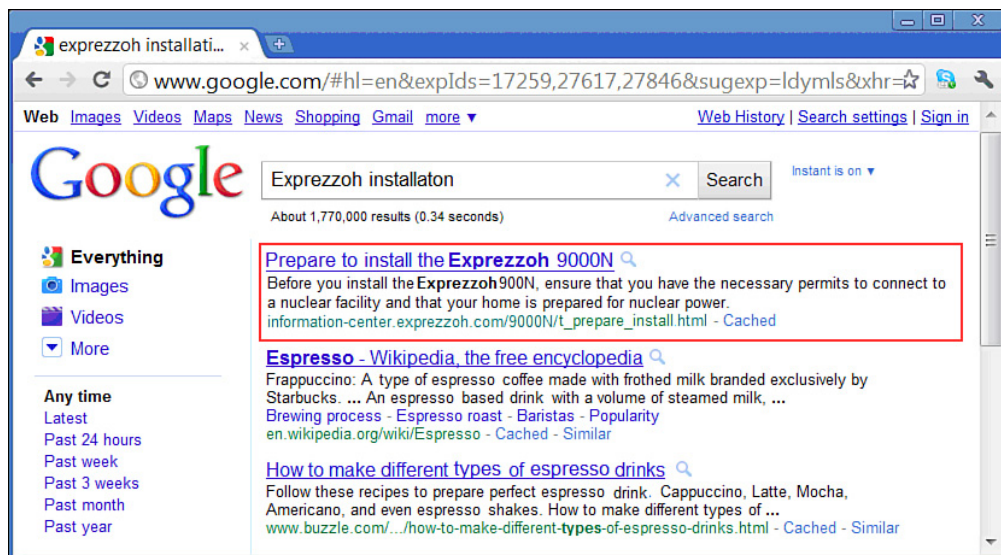


Figure 5.4 Short description text as shown in search engine results.

Search results that include short description text can also display in some HTML help systems, such as Eclipse information centers, as shown in Figure 5.5.

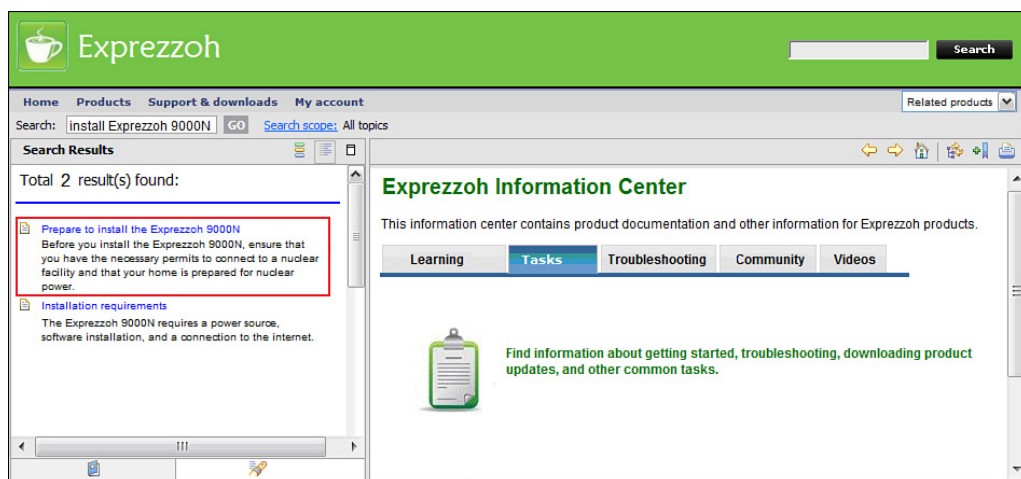


Figure 5.5 An Eclipse information center that shows short description text in search results.

Guidelines for Writing Effective Short Descriptions

To write short descriptions that are effective in all the venues where the short description can be displayed, follow these guidelines.

Briefly State the Purpose of the Topic

The short description should describe the purpose or main point of the topic. An effective short description typically answers two questions:

- What is the topic about?
- Why do users care about or need the information in the topic?

Don't use the short description to build up to a point as shown in the following example:

Incorrect

```
<title>Mountain bike disc brakes and V-brakes</title>
<shortdesc>Disc brakes first appeared on higher end mountain
bikes in the mid 2000s and are now standard on most mountain
bikes.</shortdesc>
```

Correct

```
<title> Mountain bike disc brakes and V-brakes</title>
<shortdesc>Disc brakes have several advantages over tradi-
tional V-brakes. Disc brakes are better able to dissipate
heat in heavy braking conditions, and they perform better in
muddy and wet conditions.</shortdesc>
```

Include a Short Description in Every Topic

If you decide to use the `<shortdesc>` element, (and, of course, you should), you must include it in every topic. Including short descriptions in all topics is necessary because of the way links display in the output. You should ensure that the documentation has consistent output and topic introductions.

If you don't use short descriptions for all topics, you see:

- A mixture of links with and without short descriptions
- Content other than the short description displayed in the search engine results

For example, in Figure 5.6, the parent topic "Prepare to install the Exprezzoh 9000N" has four child task topics. Only two of the child topics have short descriptions, which causes the output to be inconsistent. Your users might even think that you simply forgot to add short descriptions.

Prepare to install the Exprezzoh 9000N

Before you install the Exprezzoh 9000N, ensure that you gather the necessary permits and select a nuclear fusion reactor to connect to.

1. [Gather and mail mandatory permits](#)

2. [Identify a nuclear reactor to connect to](#)

After you obtain the necessary permits to connect to a fusion reactor, you must identify a reactor that is within 100 miles of your home.

3. [Prepare your home for connecting to a fusion reactor](#)

4. [Software and hardware requirements](#)

Before you can use the Exprezzoh 9000N, you must have the correct software and hardware.

Parent topic: [Install, configure, and make beverages with the Exprezzoh 9000N](#)

Figure 5.6 Short descriptions that are missing from links to task topics 1 and 3.

Missing short descriptions also affect search engine results. Users will see text from other parts of the topic that might be less effective at describing the main point of the topic. For example, the search results for an API reference topic that lacks a short description might show confusing or even nonsensical text, as shown in Figure 5.7.

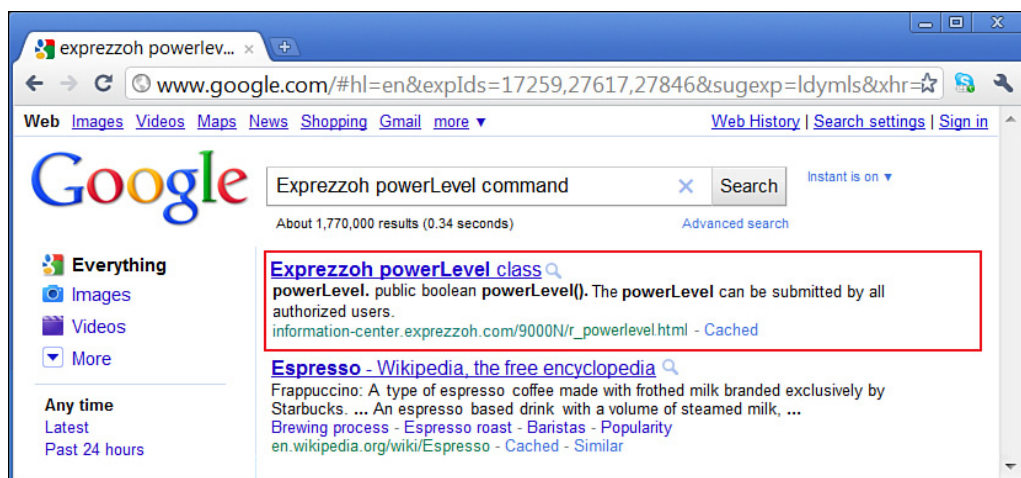


Figure 5.7 Confusing search results that show text from other parts of the topic because the topic has no short description.



Tip: To ensure that all topics have short descriptions, make the `<shortdesc>` element a required element in topics or modify your transform settings to issue warnings for topics that are missing the `<shortdesc>` element.

Use Complete, Grammatical Sentences

For consistency across topics, ensure that your short descriptions are complete sentences and follow standard grammar, punctuation, and style rules. Incomplete sentences can look odd when other short descriptions are complete sentences. Also, complete sentences are easier for native and nonnative speakers to read and are easier to translate.

Incorrect

```
<title>Cappuccino</title>
<shortdesc>Contains 1/3 espresso, 1/3 steamed milk, and 1/3
finely whipped milk foam.</shortdesc>
```

Correct

```
<title>Cappuccino</title>
<shortdesc>The traditional cappuccino is made with 1/3
espresso, 1/3 steamed milk, and 1/3 finely whipped milk
foam.</shortdesc>
```



Watch out: Some writing teams might decide to use incomplete sentences for short reference topics, such as topics for API information. If you decide to use incomplete sentences in these cases, remember that your short descriptions will be inconsistent compared to other topics in your information set.

Don't Introduce Lists, Figures, or Tables

Don't use short descriptions to introduce lists, figures, or tables because such introductions seem odd when you view the automatically generated short description text in child links or hover text.

For example, the short description shown in Figure 5.8 introduces a list.

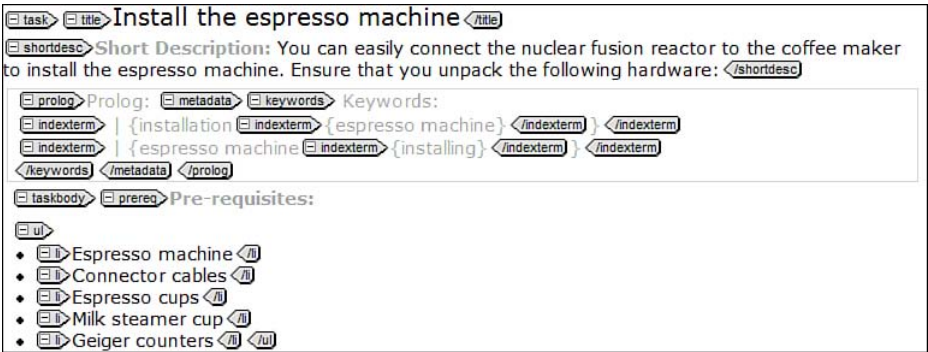


Figure 5.8 An ineffective short description that introduces a list.

A short description that introduces a list might seem fine when you first read the topic, but notice what happens when you build output, which generates child links. The short description for the topic “Install the espresso machine” ends with a colon, as shown in Figure 5.9.

Install, configure, and make beverages with the Exprezzoh 9000N

The Exprezzoh 9000N does more than just help you make coffee beverages. This scalable, cross-dimensional product can display calorie, caffeine, and other nutrition facts, feed your pets, power most other appliances in your home, play your favorite music, and do many other tasks.

The Exprezzoh 9000N is a powerful household tool because it uses nuclear energy as its power source. Just hook it to a nuclear fusion reactor and you are ready to make great coffee and other beverages.

[Prepare to install the Exprezzoh 9000N](#)

Before you install the Exprezzoh 9000N, ensure that you gather the necessary permits and select a nuclear fusion reactor to connect to.

[Install the espresso machine](#)

You can easily connect the nuclear fusion reactor to the coffee maker to install the espresso machine. Ensure that you unpack the following hardware:

Figure 5.9 A short description as shown with a child link for a topic that introduces a list.

An introduction to a list in the short description also doesn't seem to make sense in hover text for a related link, as shown in Figure 5.10.

Parent topic: [Install, configure, and make beverages with the Exprezzoh 9000N](#)

Related concepts
[Nuclear fusion as a power source for the Exprezzoh 9000N](#)

Related tasks
[Install the espresso machine](#)

You can easily connect the nuclear fusion reactor to the coffee maker to install the espresso machine. Ensure that you unpack the following hardware:

Figure 5.10 A short description that introduces a list as seen in hover text for a link.

As seen in the link text, the short description for the topic “Install the espresso machine” tries to introduce some illusory list that no one can see. Your users might even think something is broken! To correct this problem, simply move the list introduction to the body element of the topic and rewrite the short description. Figure 5.11 shows how removing the list introduction from the short description improves the link preview in the output.

Install, configure, and make beverages with the Exprezzoh 9000N

The Exprezzoh 9000N does more than just help you make coffee beverages. This scalable, cross-dimensional product can display calorie, caffeine, and other nutrition facts, feed your pets, power most other appliances in your home, play your favorite music, and do many other tasks.

The Exprezzoh 9000N is a powerful household tool because it uses nuclear energy as its power source. Just hook it to a nuclear fusion reactor and you are ready to make great coffee and other beverages.

[Prepare to install the Exprezzoh 9000N](#)

Before you install the Exprezzoh 9000N, ensure that you gather the necessary permits and select a nuclear fusion reactor to connect to.

[Install the espresso machine](#)

You can easily connect the nuclear fusion reactor to the coffee maker to install the espresso machine.

Figure 5.11 An improved short description for a child link that doesn't introduce a list.

Keep Short Descriptions Short

Because of the different ways short description text can be displayed in output, you need to keep short descriptions short. Lengthy text in the <shortdesc> element makes it difficult to scan automatically generated child links and hover text for links. In rare cases, the short description can be up to 50 words, but keep most under 35 words.

Figure 5.12 shows a lengthy short description for the topic “Prepare to install the Exprezzoh 9000N” that not only takes up a great deal of space when displayed as a preview for a child topic, but the wordy description is also confusing.

Prepare to install the Exprezzoh 9000N

Before you install the Exprezzoh 9000N, ensure that you have the necessary permits to connect to the nuclear facility of your choice and that your home is prepared for nuclear power.

1. [Gather and mail mandatory permits](#)

You can use the permit forms that are provided with the espresso machine. You must complete each form and have them signed by the appropriate official.

2. [Identify a nuclear reactor to connect to](#)

After you obtain the necessary permits to connect to a fusion reactor, you must identify a reactor that is within 100 miles of your home.

3. [Prepare your home for connecting to a nuclear reactor](#)

Ensure that your family, pets, neighbors, and all living things within 100 mile radius of your home are protected before you connect the espresso machine to nuclear power. You must prepare your home by setting up Geiger counters, radiation containment vessels, and other hardware. To complete the preparation, you must have your home inspected by nuclear facility inspectors.

Figure 5.12 A long short description that is difficult to scan.

To break up long short descriptions, you can simply move much of the short description text to the body element so that the short description can live up to its name, as shown in Figure 5.13.

task

title

Prepare your home for connecting to a nuclear reactor

title

shortdesc

Short Description: Ensure that your family, pets, neighbors, and all living things within 100 mile radius of your home are protected before you connect the espresso machine to nuclear power.

shortdesc

taskbody

context

p

You must prepare your home by setting up Geiger counters, radiation containment vessels, and other hardware. To complete the preparation, you must have your home inspected by nuclear facility inspectors.

p

Figure 5.13 An improved short description that is fewer than 35 words.

The short description in the child link for the topic “Prepare your home for connecting to a nuclear reactor” is now more effective, as shown in Figure 5.14.