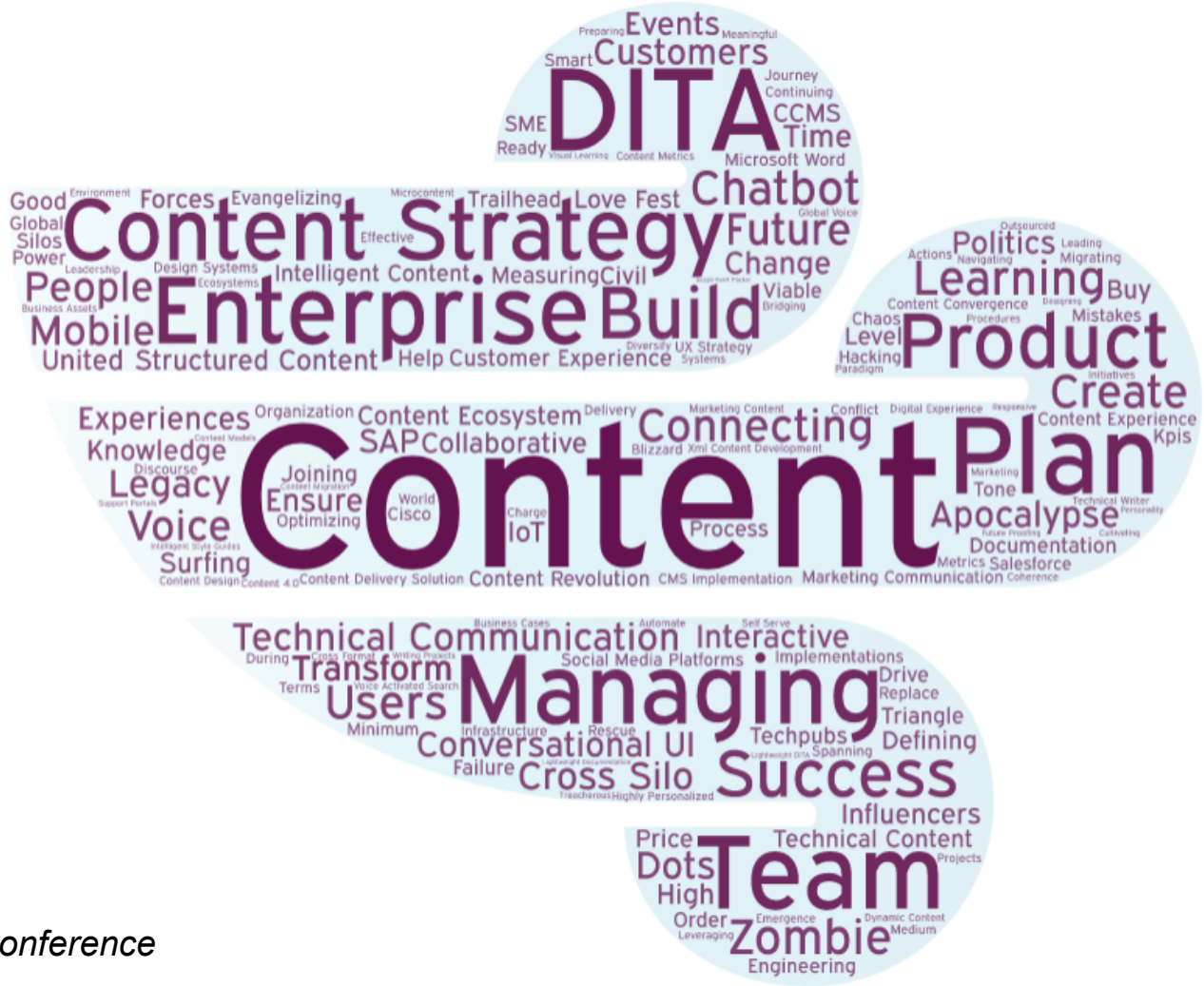
Overview of Topic-Based, Structured Content + DITA

From the companion repository of
Technical Communication and the Discipline of Content
Rebekka Andersen & Carlos Evia, creators

The Content Conversation Today



Talk Titles 2018

The LavaCon Content Strategy Conference

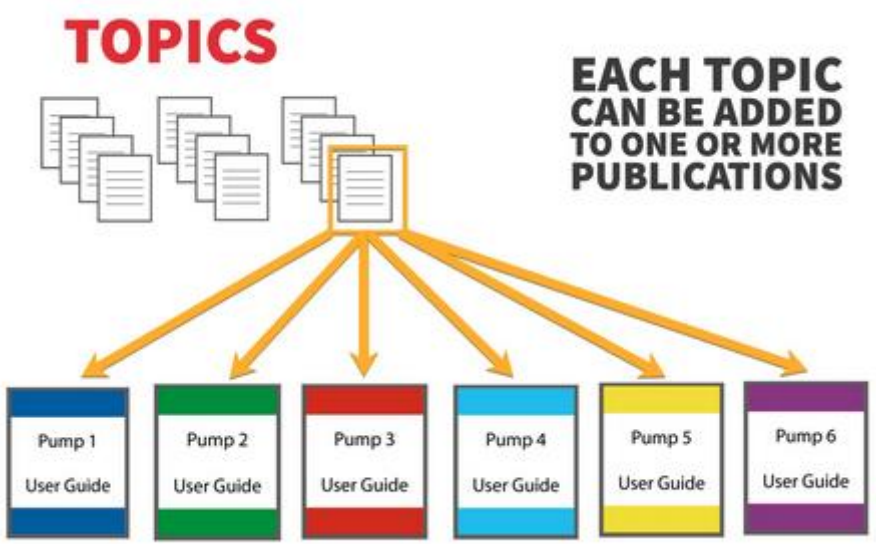
The Content Conversation Today

Talk Titles 2016, 2017, & 2018
Center for Information-Development Management Best Practices Conference

Table Talk Titles (Vendors) 2016, 2017, & 2018
Center for Information-Development Management Best Practices Conference

Topic-Based Content

"Topic-based writing refers to the method of writing content so that it's chunked into short topics instead of longer chapters or documents."



What is Topic-Based Documentation?

Topic-based documentation is a way of structuring content in separate 'chunks'. So instead of having all of your content in sequence in a single file, such as a Word document, you have lots of separate pieces of information. You can then build a user guide or help system by choosing which topics to include.What's the point in doing that? Let's take a look at the benefits.

Structured Content (= topic based)

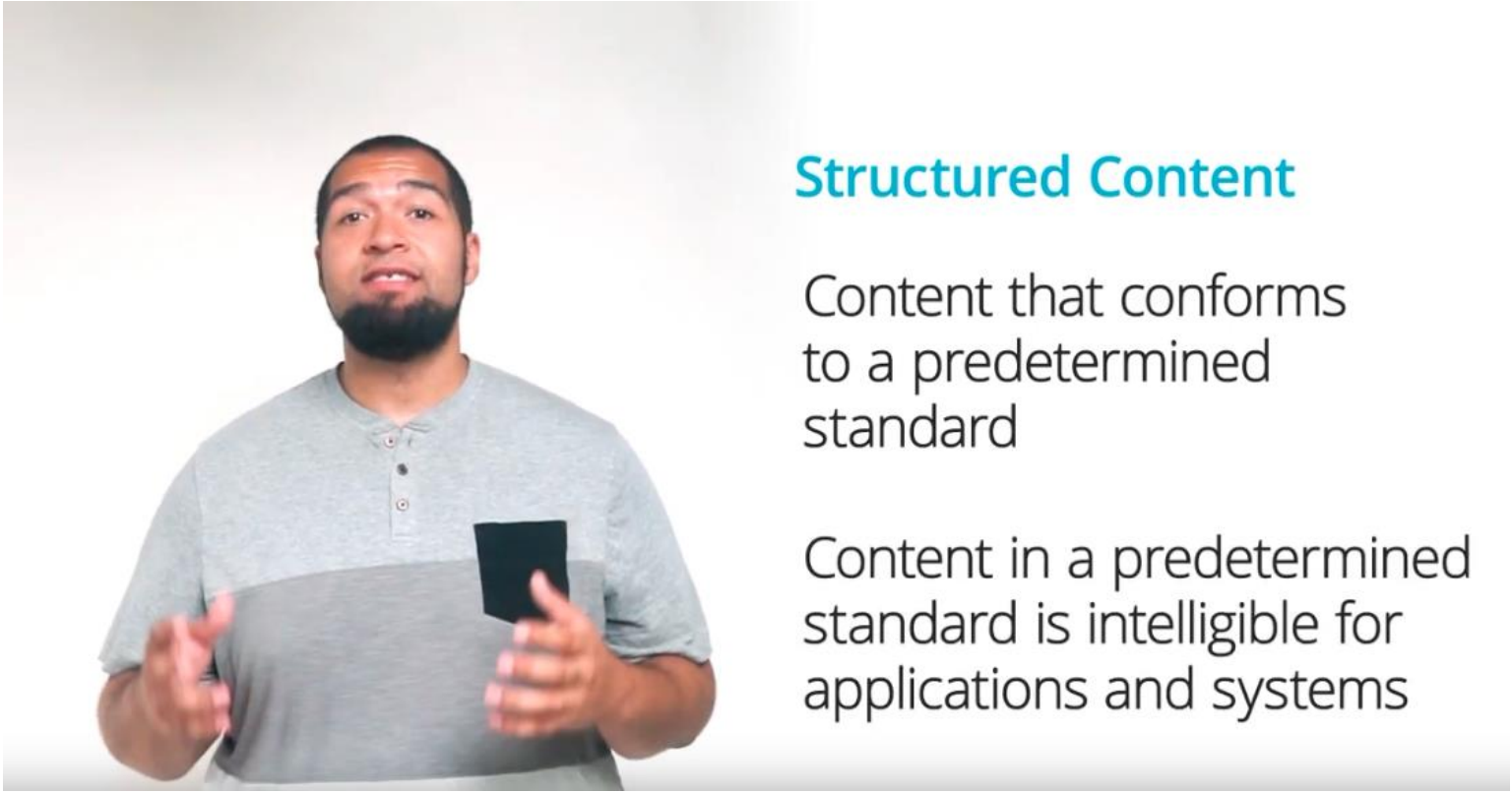
Structured content is “designed to be modular, structured, reusable, format free, and semantically rich and, as a consequence, discoverable, reconfigurable, and adaptable”
~ Rockley, Cooper, & Abel, 2015

[intelligent content, smart content]

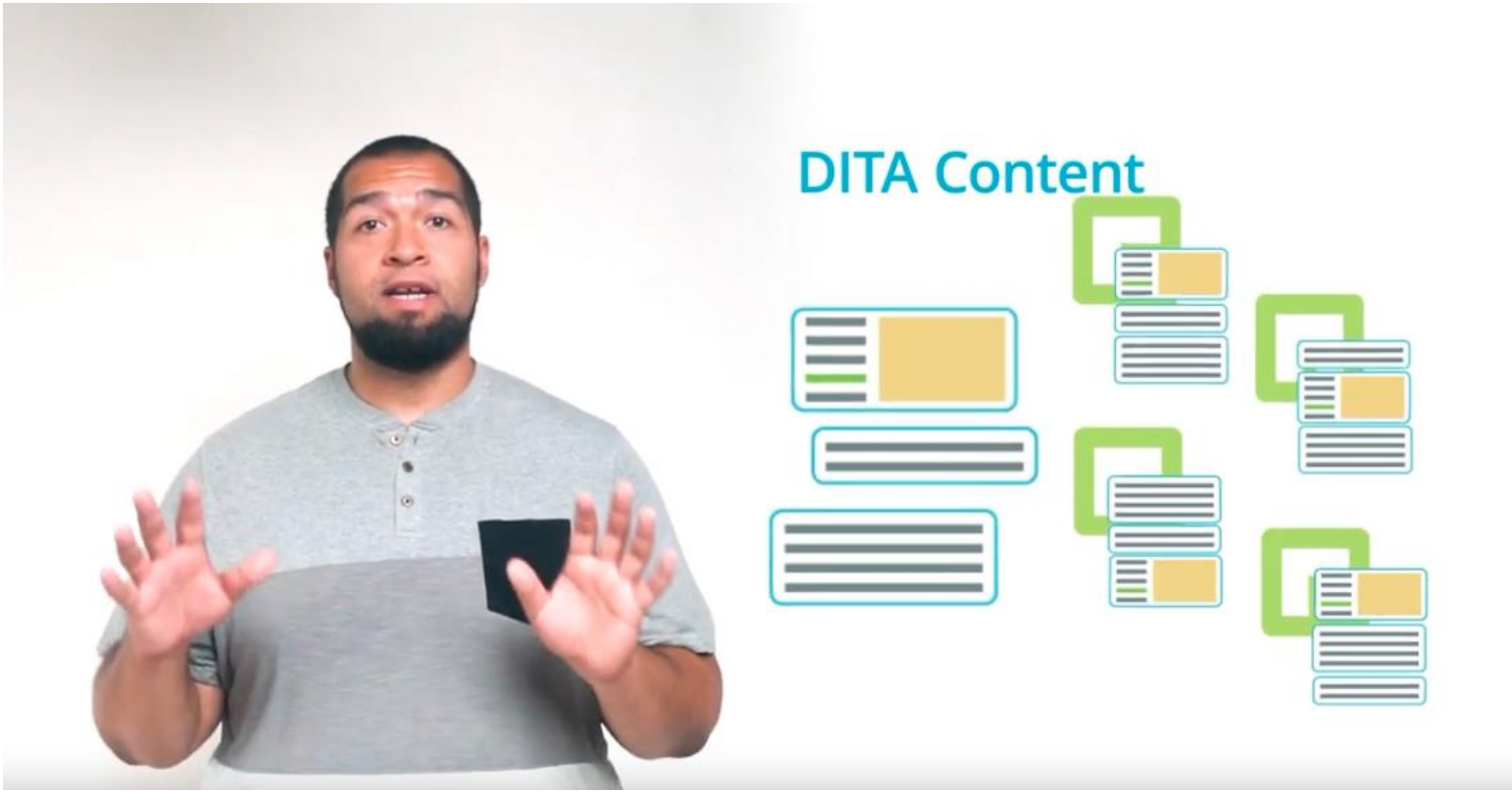
Image Credits: Rick Mason from unsplash

<structure+“semantics”>  </structure>

Structured Content



DITA Content (topic-based, structured content)



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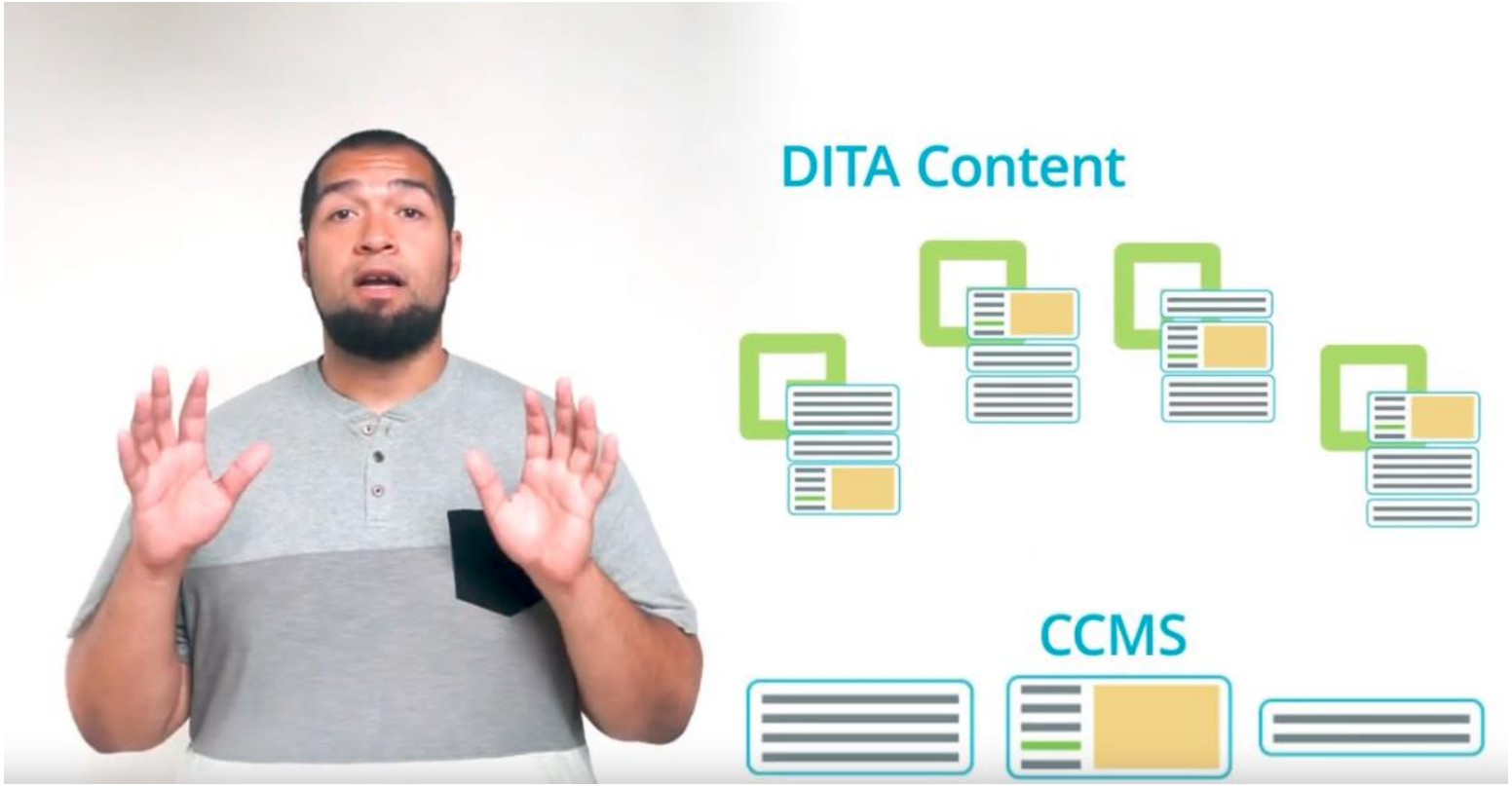


What is DITA?

What is DITA exactly?

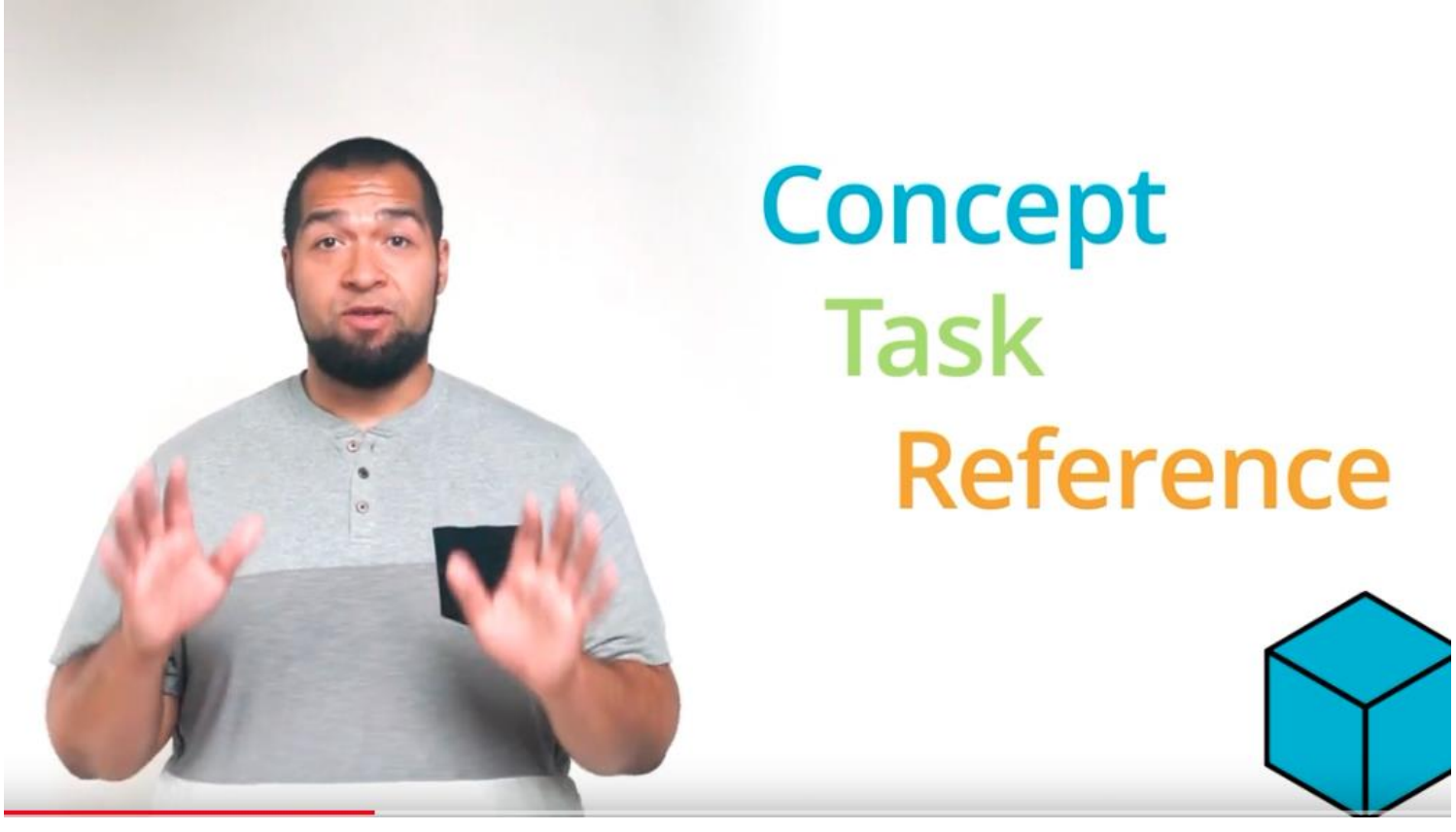
- An XML architecture and semantic markup language specifically designed by technical writers for creating structured, technical content

XML enables the processes of identifying, separating, and recombining content for different purposes.

What is XML?

Extensible Markup Language (XML) lets you define and store data in a shareable manner. XML supports information exchange between computer systems such as websites, databases, and third-party applications. Predefined rules make it easy to transmit data as XML files over any network because the recipient can use those rules to read the data accurately and efficiently.

What Topics Does DITA Define?



What Topics Does DITA Define?

Concept

Very versatile and used for:

- Descriptive information
- Extended definitions
- Conceptual information
- Whatever the reader needs

Task

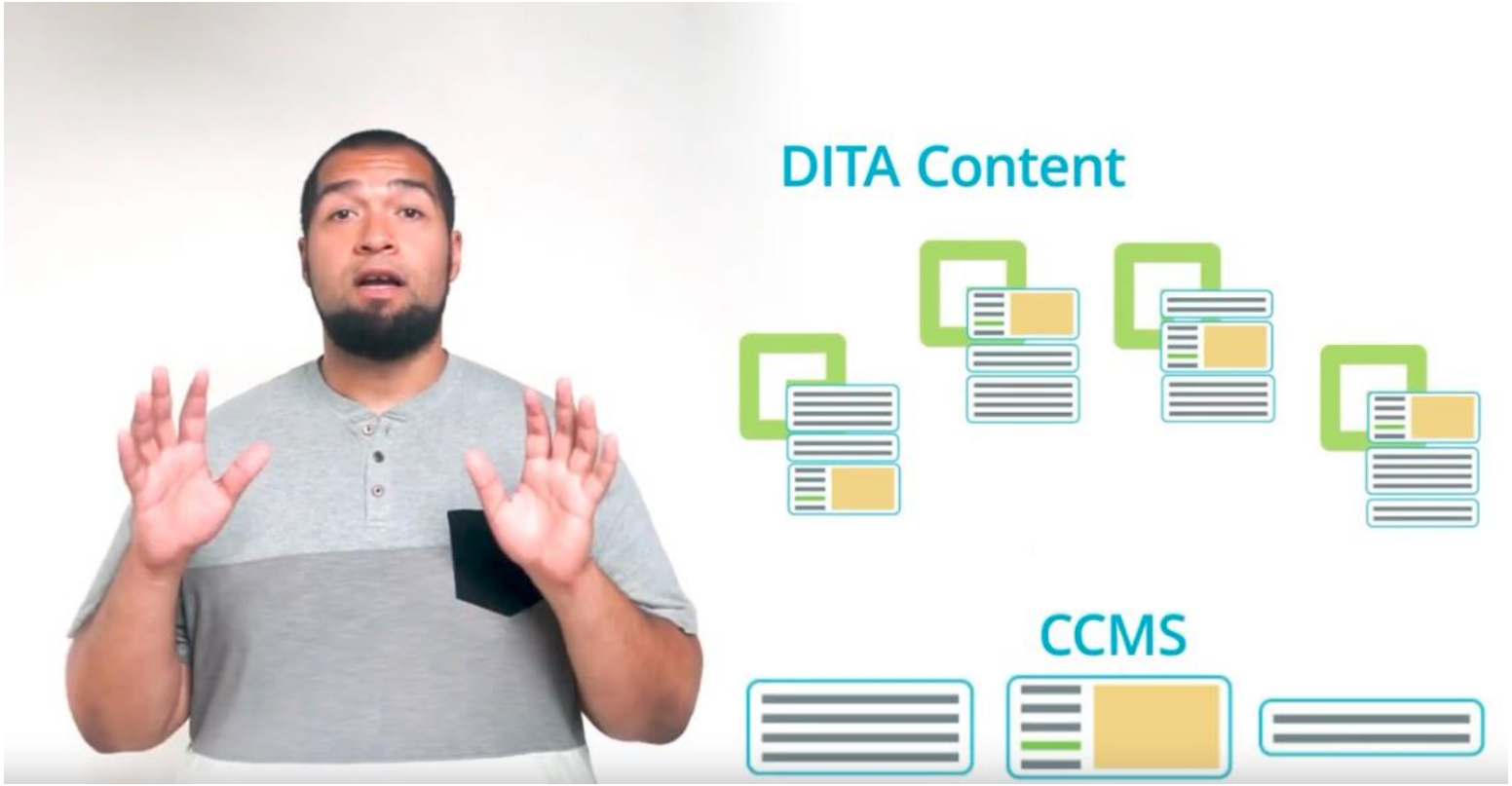
Provides the “How - to” or the “step - by - step” instruction for a task

Reference

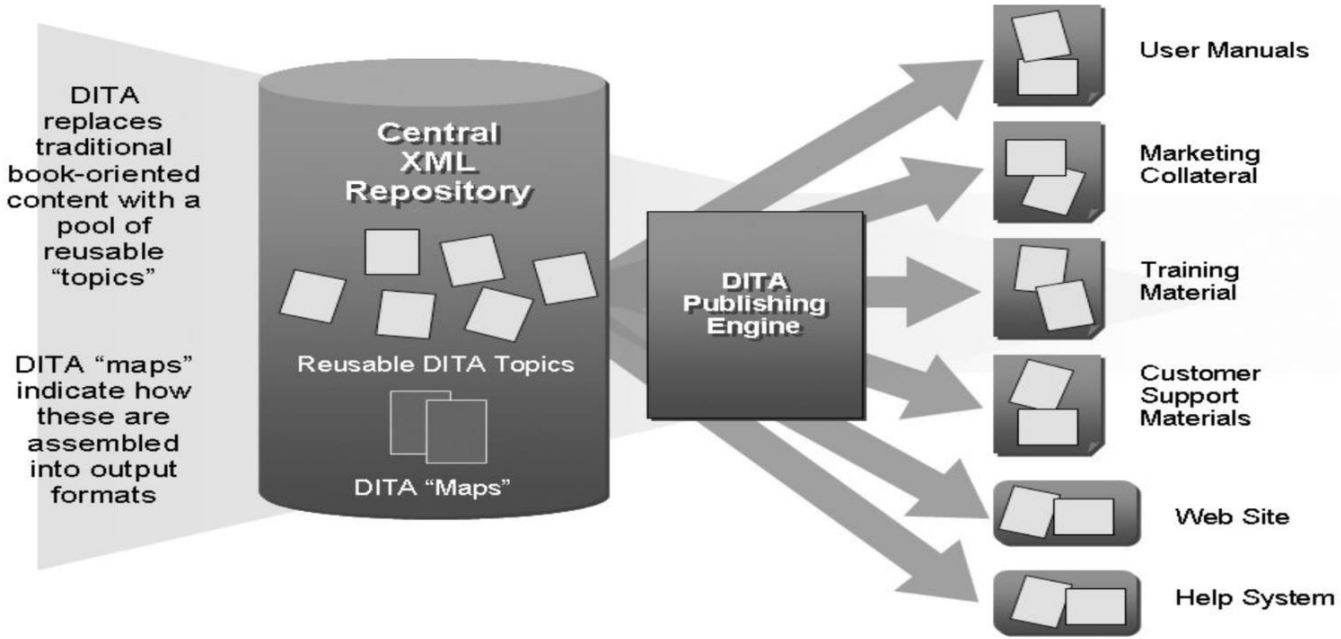
Provides specifications about a product, such as:

- Product parts
- Environmental specifications
- Commands
- API information
- Anything typically represented within a table or bulleted list

What Topics Does DITA Define?



What Does the Publishing Process Look Like?



DITA Environment

What is Structured Authoring?

"A publishing workflow that lets you define and enforce consistent organization of information in documents, whether printed or online"

O'Keefe & Pringle, "Structured authoring and XML," 2017, p. 2

"A modular approach to content creation where content is created in components – or topics – that can be mixed and reused in different contexts."

DITAExchange,"Introduction to Structured Authoring," 2023

- **Each component (topic) adheres to a specific structure**—a specific set of software-enforced rules (via DTDs of schemas) governing allowable elements, attributes, and relationships. These rules enforce or "validate" consistent structure across similar pieces of information, such as a recipe or a product description.

- **Each component (topic) includes semantic markup in the form of elements and attributes** that describes the different kinds of content in the component. Semantic markup—or tags—are human and machine readable.

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```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
<!DOCTYPE task PUBLIC "-//OASIS//DTD DITA Task//EN" "task.dtd">
<task id="t-marinara">
    <title>Marinara Sauce</title>
    <shortdesc>Prepare a crowd-
pleasing red sauce for pasta in about 30 minutes.</shortdesc>
    <prolog>
        <author>Unknown</author>
        <metadata>
            <category>Italian</category>
        </metadata>
    </prolog>
    <taskbody>
      <prereq>
            <ul>
                <li>2 tbsp. of olive oil</li>
                <li>2 cloves of garlic, minced</li>
                <li>1/2 tsp. of hot red pepper</li>
                <li>28 oz. of canned tomatoes, preferably San Marzano</li>
                <li>2 tbsp. of parsley, chopped</li>
            </ul>
        </prereq>
        <steps>
            <step>
                <cmd>Heat olive oil in a large saucepan on medium</cmd>
            </step>
            <step>
                <cmd>Add garlic and hot red pepper and sweat until fragrant
</cmd>
            </step>
            <step>
                <cmd>Add tomatoes, breaking up into smaller pieces</cmd>
            </step>
            <step>
                <cmd>Simmer on medium-low heat for at least 20 minutes</cmd>
            </step>
            <step>
                <cmd>Add parsley</cmd>
            </step>
            <step>
                <cmd>Simmer for another five minutes</cmd>
            </step>
            <step>
                <cmd>Serve over long pasta.</cmd>
            </step>
        </steps>
    </taskbody>
</task>
```

DTD Declaration

Source of Figure: Carlos Evia, 2018

FIGURE 1.3 Marinara sauce recipe as a DITA task. The standard's "fully tested DTD or schema for XML-based authoring" includes commonly used elements or moves in technical publication. Thus, the recipe collector does not have to invent custom tags.

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Declaration

Marinara Sauce

Prepare a crowd-pleasing red sauce for pasta in about 30 minutes.

- 2 tbsp. of olive oil
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1. Heat olive oil in a large saucepan on medium
2. Add garlic and hot red pepper and sweat until fragrant
3. Add tomatoes, breaking up into smaller pieces
4. Simmer on medium-low heat for at least 20 minutes
5. Add parsley
6. Simmer for another five minutes
7. Serve over long pasta.

FIGURE 1.5 Marinara sauce DITA task transformed to an HTML5 deliverable. This sample output includes a link to an external CSS file for formatting.

Source of Figures: Carlos Evia, 2018

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Image Credits:
Matthew Henry
from unsplash

Image Credits: Alan Nee from unsplash